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COVID-19: A HISTORIC TRIBUTE TO THE FRONTLINERS AND ITS IMPACT ON MALAYSIA'S POLITICAL SECURITY AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

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Abstrak:

Penyakit zoonosis yang dikenali sebagai COVID-19 telah menjadi musuh nombor satu dunia sejak tiga tahun lalu. Suku pertama 2020 bermula dengan kematian melebihi 1 juta orang mulai awal Mac 2020, dan sehingga kini (Mei 2023), 6,921,614 kematian seperti yang dilaporkan dalam papan pemuka harian Pertubuhan Kesihatan Sedunia (WHO). Dalam masa yang mencabar ini, kepimpinan, kecekapan, dan komunikasi telah menjadi tumpuan semua kerajaan dalam memerangi penyebaran COVID-19. Malaysia tidak terkecuali dalam memulakan perang melawan virus dahsyat ini yang boleh membawa maut. Kajian mengenai dinamik perkhidmatan awam berbanding kepimpinan politik dijalankan untuk melihat akan corak tadbir urus dalam menangani krisis pandemik. Artikel ini menerangkan dalam konteks Malaysia, bagaimana kepimpinan perkhidmatan awam telah menangani pandemik menjadi situasi yang lebih baik dengan kepimpinan yang cemerlang, kecekapan yang betul, dan strategi komunikasi yang berkesan dalam memastikan keluk untuk kes baharu diratakan dalam tempoh yang lebih singkat. Artikel ini juga untuk mengkaji kestabilan politik dengan mengambil kira aspek aktor politik dengan penjawat awam dalam usaha memerangi virus merbahaya ini. Nilai tambah dalam artikel ini adalah bagaimana pandemik diurus dalam keadaan kerajaan baru ditubuhkan ketika itu. Ini memandangkan tahap keburukan pandemik dan penubuhan kerajaan yang belum pernah berlaku sebelum ini (melalui kemelut politik), menyumbang kepada perspektif baharu dalam menangani krisis di Malaysia. Dalam hubungan ini, struktur sedia ada dan aktor pengurusan bencana juga diteliti, untuk mencari sinergi yang lebih baik dalam usaha negara

yang terjejas dengann COVID-19. Perbincangan juga menyumbang sebagai nilai tambah kepada kesiapsiagaan Malaysia dalam mengharungi krisis masa depan. Bertentangan dengan persepsi tentang kurangnya keupayaan kerajaan untuk mengharungi krisis, artikel ini mengetengahkan strategi penyelarasan semua aktor dan institusi yang terlibat, yang mendapat pengiktirafan antarabangsa dan tempatan. Walau bagaimanapun, dalam jangka panjang, kelemahan perlu dikenal pasti dalam membina rangka kerja yang lebih baik untuk masa hadapan. Sama ada perkhidmatan awam secara amnya masih tidak fleksibel untuk norma baharu atau sebaliknya, akan dibincangkan dalam artikel ini.

Kata Kunci:

Perkhidmatan Awam Malaysia, Kepimpinan, Kecekapan, Komunikasi, Kestabilan Politik

Abstract:

The zoonotic disease called COVID-19 has been the world's number one enemy for the past three years now. The first quarter of 2020 kicked start with deaths exceeding 1 million people from early March 2020, and to date (May 2023), 6,921,614 deaths as reported in the World Health Organisation (WHO) daily dashboard. In this trying time, leadership, competency, and communication have been the epicenter of all governments in combating the spread of COVID-19. A study on the dynamics of public service vis-à-vis political leadership is conducted to generate behavioural patterns of governance in handling the pandemic crisis. The secondary sources used in this study's data gathering include official government documents, related books, online publications, dissertations, documents, archives, and journals that have been published in the study's field. After that, these data underwent qualitative analysis. This article explains in the Malaysian context, how leadership of the public service has shaped the pandemic with excellent leadership, proper competency, and effective communication strategy in ensuring the curve for new cases is flattened in a shorter period. It goes further to re-examine political security taking into aspect of political actors with civil servants. Given the severity of the pandemic and the unprecedented government's establishment (through political turmoil), contribute new perspectives for handling the crisis in Malaysia. In doing so, existing structures and actors of disaster management are also examined, to search for a better synergy in the nation's effort undermining COVID-19. Contrary to the perception of the less-ability of the government to weather the crisis, the article highlighted on coordination strategy of all actors and institutions involved, which received international and local recognition.

Keywords:

Public Service of Malaysia, Leadership, Competency, Communication, Political Security.

Introduction

"...And this government may not be the government that you voted for. But I want all of you to know that this government cares for you..."- Muhyiddin Yassin, Malaysia's 8th Prime Minister.

The situational report released by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 21 January 2020 proves that Corona Virus Disease or COVID-19 is not an amusing subject to deal with. Based on its report, 176 countries were affected and infected with the deadly virus that could kill half of the global population in a matter of weeks if not by days. Globally, as of 3 May 2023, there have been 765,222,932 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 6,921,614 deaths, reported to WHO[1]. As of 4 May 2023, a total of 13,349,209,463 vaccine doses have been administered. With the number of deaths against total confirmed cases, the Europe region tops the chart in terms of cases.

For Malaysia, the number of cases or incidents are mainly derived from five categories listed by the Health Ministry namely Patient Under Investigation (PUI); Close Contact; Islamic group of Tabligh; Influenza-Like Illness (ILI), and/or Severe Acute Respiratory Infection (SARI); and Humanitarian Mission. In the second wave, it is believed incidents were contracted from locals who heavily participated in the Sabah state general election campaign and from Kedah prison detainees. In earlier incidents, it was derived from people traveling to countries such as Italy, China, Iran, the Republic of Korea, and others. Malaysia in the second wave of the pandemic registered 155 deaths from 15,096 confirmed cases as of 10 October 2020. Fast forward as of 3 January 2020 to 3 May 2023, there have been 5,071,840 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 37,020 deaths, reported to WHO. As of 22 April 2023, a total of 72,611,509 vaccine doses have been administered. Indeed, the impact of these outbreaks affected the economy, psychosocial, political, and international relations. However, the responses to these outbreaks had improved along with the development of new technologies in diagnosis, surveillance, information technology and human resource development.

This article explores further, in the given situation, the reaction and coordination of public service structure. It posits the existence of a leadership and competency vacuum in the public service while handling the national crisis. Coordination between public service and the political actors are also observed, examining the unity in risk communication to the mass. Policy recommendations range from the need to view a pro-active leadership of public service in times of unplanned crisis.

Literature Review

Respiratory Related Disease in Malaysia: A Historical Insights

    British Malaya Spanish Flu 1918

According to Liew (2007), the press condemns the failure of state biomedical institutions in dealing with fatal influenza. Where it is observed that proper Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) were poorly implemented or not even established to tackle the pandemic. With limited resources i.e., medical devices, drugs and infrastructure, the authority's failure to communicate about the danger of influenza was one of the main causes the number of deaths was rocketing. Government departments were not cooperating effectively because of general ignorance among non-related agencies hence the wider spread of disease. Although the number of populations between 1918 and 2020 are vastly wide, it boils to the administration in the civil service that

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[1] The WHO coronavirus (COVID-19) dashboard presents official daily counts of COVID-19 cases, deaths and vaccine utilisation reported by countries, territories, and areas. The dashboard provides a frequently updated data visualization, data dissemination and data exploration resource.

will determine how successful the flu is eliminated, and, how victims are taken care by the government. Approximately 35,000 people died in the 1918 crisis

Modern infectious diseases outbreak

Structurally in Malaysia, infectious disease management is under the purview of the Disease Control Division, Ministry of Health. In 2003 the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak demonstrated most clearly the need for preparedness and rapid response. Any lack of preparedness and delay in response can lead to catastrophic impacts on human lives and the economy. SARS killed nearly 10 percent of the 8,096 people in 29 countries who fell ill. A total of 774 people died, according to the World Health Organization. For Malaysia total accumulative cases of 'probable'(Loh et al., 2004) SARS registered at five infected cases with two deaths (WHO, n.d.).

Prior to SARS, Malaysia witnessed several infectious diseases which resulted in the loss of lives, property, and economic activities. In 1996 a major cholera outbreak in Penang with 1,182 reported cases and 231 detected carriers were dealt with effectively by the Health Ministry without any reported death. Following that in 1997, the Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease (HFMD) in Sarawak drew major attention when 31 pediatric demise were reported. Two years later in 1999, the Nipah Encephalitis outbreak- the first of such infection in the world resulted in 283 cases with 109 deaths. Infectious diseases can also emerge as bioterrorist attacks such Anthrax scare that occurred in 2001 around the world with Malaysia registered 136 reported incidents without any fatality (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2003).

Above all, strategies to enhance preparedness against both threats depend on an effective and efficient health infrastructure, leadership, and competency. As detection and response to infectious disease outbreaks require multi-sectoral, multi-agency, and multidisciplinary - collaboration within and outside the government's ecosystem is crucial in this trying period.

Directive No.20 National Security Council (MKN 20[2])

For Malaysia under Section 11 of the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act (PCID) 1988, the person authorised to declare an outbreak is the Minister of Health. Early investigation and verification of an infectious disease outbreak and institution of control measures must proceed with such declaration of an outbreak. For COVID-19[3], it is categorised as a disaster since the complexity of the outbreak was affecting nationwide and around the globe. Under MKN 20, a disaster is defined as an incident that occurs without warning, is complex in nature, and results in loss of lives, property, and damage to the environment. It also disrupts services and local community activities. Management of this incident requires extensive resources (man, money, and material) and effective multi-agency co-ordination and participation.

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[2] *Refers to Arahan No.20 Majlis Keselamatan Negara (MKN 20). A document that orders all government machinery to be activated during emergency ie. Pandemic, endemic, and natural disaster. This order is approved and signed only by the Prime Minister of Malaysia.*

[3] www.sciencenews.org *explained the Coronaviruses are zoonotic, meaning they originate in animals and sometimes leap to humans. The first 2019-nCoV infections detected in December 2019 were in patients who had visited the Huanan seafood market in Wuhan. The market was closed January 1, 2020 but health officials have yet to determine from which type of animal the virus jumped to humans. An analysis of the illness in the first 41 patients diagnosed with 2019-nCoV from Wuhan, China suggests that the virus acts similarly to SARS and MERS.*

In recommending the invoking of MKN 20 in the event of infectious disease outbreaks are- the magnitude of the outbreak in terms of the number of cases, number of deaths, large geographical areas involved; the nature of the confirmed or suspected pathogen, an imported known highly virulent pathogen e.g. Marburg, Lassa, Yellow Fever, Ebola, etc., a newly emerging pathogen that is associated with high mortality rate, and highly contagious air-borne pathogen; the outbreak is the result of confirmed or suspected deliberate release of biological agents; any outbreak or perceived outbreak that results in mass panic and hysteria; and any other outbreaks which in the judgment of Ministry of Health requires the operationalisation of MKN 20 or known as MKN 20.

COVID-19 Pandemic
The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has spread worldwide, affecting almost all countries in the world including Malaysia. This outbreak was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China and countries around the world cautioned the public to take responsive care (Chang et al., 2023; Sintema, 2020). The public care strategies have included handwashing, wearing face masks, physical distancing and avoiding mass gathering and assemblies. Many countries had lockdown and staying home strategies in order to flatten the curve and control the transmission of the disease (Wendy et al., 2023). Countries were finding the best strategies to curb this decease and many methods in the government sector was establish.

In Malaysia, the chain of command was established with the Ministry of Health as the lead agency supported by National Security Council or Majlis Keselamatan Negara (MKN) as the main secretariat reporting directly to the Prime Minister on a daily basis while the National Disaster Management Agency or NADMA were tasked to provide monetary budget and coordination for House Surveillance Centre (HSC) with the help from state agencies namely *Jawatankuasa Pengurusan Bencana Negeri* (JPBN), *Jawatankuasa Pengurusan Bencana Daerah* (at district level) and Welfare department (JKM) in providing food and shelter to victims. While ensuring public security and defense are safeguarded, the Royal Police of Malaysia (PDRM); Armed Forces of Malaysia (ATM); Fire and Rescue Department (Bomba); and Civil Defense Agency (APM) are fully mobilised. Numerous agencies under various Ministries/Agencies were also doing their part in managing the contagion, and, sacrificing their lives and family for the betterment of the country's socio-economic interest from collapsing. Any misappropriation of managing the outbreak may threaten the survival of the nation-state (Baumgartner, 2023; Picon, 2022; Caballero-Anthony, 2005)

The roles and functions become greater when the chain reaction is rapidly spreading particularly in the second wave. The ER must be efficient and effective in response. With this unexpected precedent, resources became limited. Doctors, nurses, and other front liners were doing their best to save lives while accommodating the limited number of beds at all public health premises. Of course, there are hiccups, but Malaysians are fortunate that the government's commitment to ensure its citizens are given the best medical attention and facilities.

In his announcement and to further enhance sustainability, the Prime Minister tabled the Economic Stimulus Package or PRIHATIN worth RM250 billion (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2020) to safeguard the social safety net whereby RM128 billion was allocated for the welfare of the people, RM100 billion to support business entities including SMEs, RM2 billion to strengthen the national's economy. While RM20 billion was announced in the previous

stimulus package. All these are in tandem with the effort to combat the COVID-19 virus in which, RM 1 billion particularly was allocated to procure equipment and services related to this life-threatening virus. Overall, the stimulus package aimed at protecting the people, supporting business and strengthening the economy is timely in this extremely difficult, unprecedented, and unpredictable situation.

The table below illustrates the existing chain of communication for disaster management as stipulated in the Directive No.20 Majlis Keselamatan Negara (MKN). The communication and implementation level trickles down to the state level as the implementor of multiple functions and responsibilities in handling disasters.
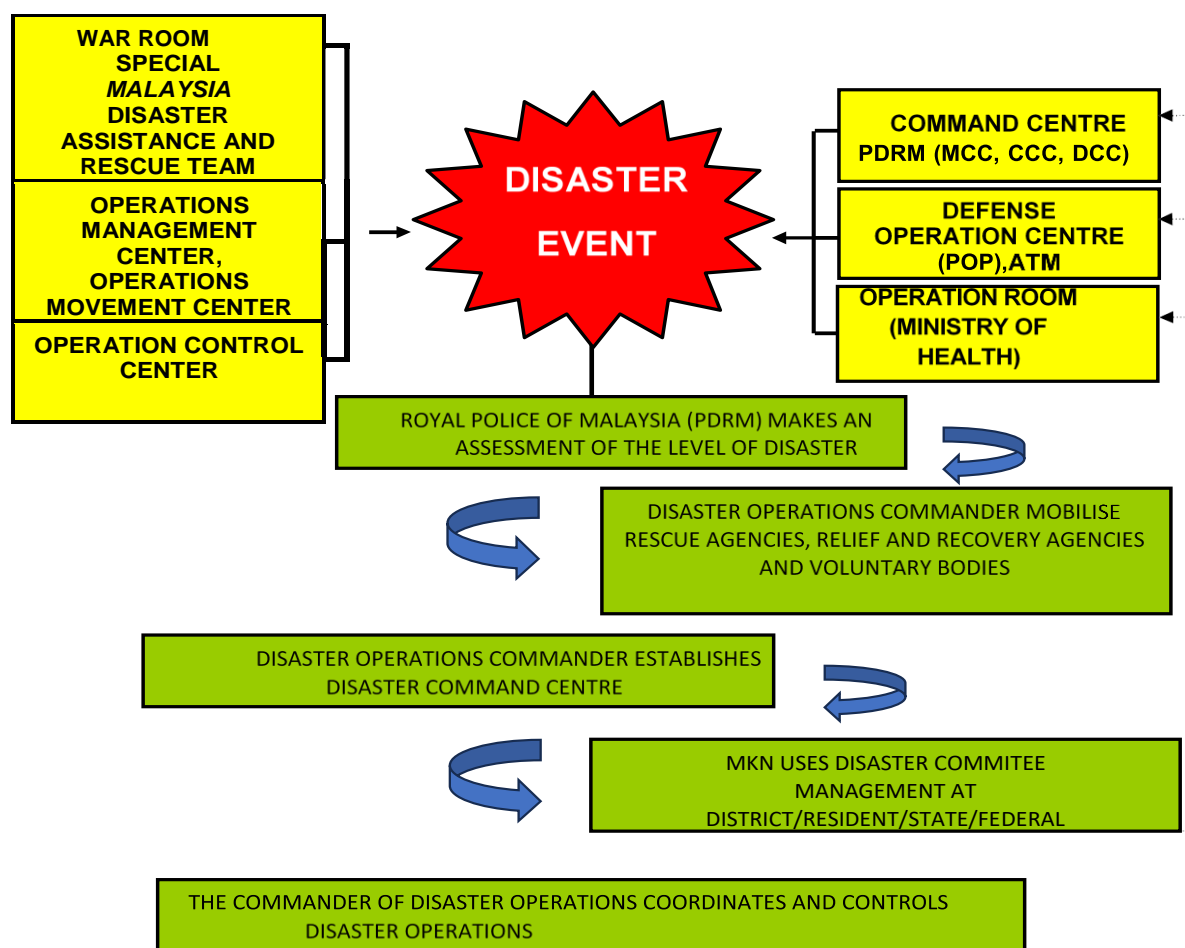

Figure 1: Movement Phase in Handling Disaster Event: Sources Directive No 20 Majlis Keselamatan Negara

Methodology
This research uses qualitative non-numerical research based on archival sources refers to a research approach that focuses on gathering and analysing non-numeric data from archived materials, past records and valid documentation (Muhumuza et al., 2022; Mabunda, 2023). The

researcher chooses this type of research because its emphasis on understanding and interpreting the content, context and meanings within the qualitative information found in archival sources (Faggiano, 2023). The researcher relies on archival sources such as existing records, documents and newspapers or any other materials that have been preserved in archives to gain information on how government deals with pandemic COVID-19 situation. The researcher also engages in the interpretation of the content found in archival sources in order to seek to understand the historical context and the significance of the information related towards COVID-19 within the broader framework of the research topic. This method was also chosen because the complexity in interpretation of qualitative analysis. Researchers encounter multiple information which requires careful consideration and justification of their chosen interpretations (Dawadi & Giri, 2021) regarding on dealing with pandemic COVID-19 situation in Malaysian context.

Findings & Discussion

Civil Service Leadership Vacuum?
A government performs manifold roles and functions. Public service over the years has been progressing relatively well with its own peculiarities and challenges. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to judge the government only on one function. From an agricultural bureaucrat to a technology driven civil service, the public service of Malaysia weathered the storm in a colorful way. In this respect, the structure of MOH is divided into two main branches under the purview of the Minister. One looks after the medical operation led by the Director General (Ketua Pengarah Kesihatan or KPK) while the Secretary-General (Ketua Setiausaha or KSU) is tasked as the Controlling Officer of the Ministry as a whole. He looks over matters pertaining to the financial management of the Ministry, procurement, development matters i.e. hospital construction and other health facilities, and human resource development for non-health related personnel. KSU has no authority in determining disease control, licensing for medical practice, and other medical and clinical matters.

KPK works together with the KSU. In the current situation, KPK will be the champion as the frontline while KSU act as the man behind the scene, making sure the pandemic is administratively sound to manage available resources in an efficient manner. This is an important aspect of managing an organisation in trying times. People may think why is the KPK making press statement but not the Minister or the KSU? As the head of the health service, the KPK is responsible for all personnel under various medical schemes which include allied health, paramedics, and auxiliary. The KPK is governed by the Medical Acts particularly the Medical Act 1971 (Pesuruhjaya Penyemak Undang-Undang, 2020) and Prevention and Control of Infectious Disease Act 1988; the rules and regulations pertaining to health and health services; and other policies. Hence to avoid any misunderstanding and miscommunication, it is obvious that KPK should be the appropriate actor to report the current situation on a daily basis without the interference of political actors or even administrators like the KSU.

Indeed, the front liners are battling the war against this vicious virus without fear or favour. Putting aside their ranks and status, they are all working towards a common goal and this must be implemented as part of reform in the civil service (Nyashanu et al., 2020). Patronage must do away, knowledge (reading more works of literature and engagement with intellectuals) and competency are the essence of succession planning, leadership together with effective communication skills must be part and parcel of the reform effort. Regardless of the scheme of services, MOH and other related agencies have proved that the Movement Control Order

(MCO) are effective if those tenets mentioned are clearly implemented in containing the spread of the disease.

While managing human resource are not as easy at this juncture, the Public Service of Malaysia especially with the direction of the three wise men i.e. The Chief Secretary of Government (KSN), Director General of the Public Service Department (KPPA), and Secretary General of Treasury (KSP) should revisit the best mechanism to rebuild this country in the context of civil service leadership post-COVID-19. Civil servants are best referred to as a group of individuals who are not elected by the people and employed through the screening and selection process by the Public Service Commission. They are the actors that embody the planning, implementation, and evaluation process, in translating policies and procedures formulated by the political government of the day. This crisis has indeed proved that saving lives must not be political, colour-blind and hierarchical. Civil servants are the actors who must ensure no one is left behind in whatever circumstances- all in the name of efficient public service delivery. Although sensitivity to political signals is of important (Christensen & Laegreid, 2009), favouritism (Lazear, 2001) must not be an option whether during crisis or post-crisis in running the civil service operation.

Besides state-of-the-art medical facilities, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown teamwork is paramount, communication is crucial, and respond and rescue are the measurement of success, and, not ceremonial. Judging from the upward trend of confirmed cases, Malaysians in general are prepared to weather the storm swiftly. As long the authority i.e. civil servants plays important role in leading the crisis, rules and regulations and other orders will be adhered to diligently by the public at large. This approach is the same when applied in the organisation, the Secretary Generals and Head of Department must provide a clear mission and objective before their subordinates hit the ground and start running. Ultimately number of deaths, negligence, and omission can be mitigated in any situation. It proves that the management of public personnel is crucial and with strong leadership, Malaysia will come back stronger. Dedicated and passionate front liners burnt their midnight out to ensure number of discharged patients increased, confirmed cases were reduced while stopping the mortality rate to the minimum level. There should not be a leadership vacuum when it comes to any situation like this, therefore a standard protocol to be invoked without political intervention in a democratic country like Malaysia. In fact, in a Sunni-based country, an Ameer must be appointed with a chain of successors in managing the public office which is still opaque now.

As a civil servant, one must not spare time for credit, although for motivational purposes it is required to elevate productivity. In taking the oath to serve the public, public officers are expected to deliver their services with scarcity of resources (Maves et al., 2020). Due to that, besides a moderate supply of medical devices to combat the virus, communication is the most powerful tool to educate the public about the latest information and updates. Besides that, the strong political will where the Prime Minister himself is leading the National Security Council to spearhead the *build-back* programs is commendable. In fact, it is the role of the whole civil service (official or unofficial) to educate the importance of security and safety during a pandemic, not just MOH, MKN, PDRM, or ATM.

Civil Service Competency Vacuum?
Competency relates to the structural capabilities of a person such as an officer in managing existing resources to elevate organisational excellence (Muzam, 2023; Christensen &

Laægreid, 2009). Mismatch of talent happens when leaders are not providing the right direction and values thus creating a less dynamic organisation to herald the government's agenda. In fact Sibonde & Dassah (2021), Mosimanegape (2020) and Azmi (2009) mentioned competent personnel for the right job are scarce in the public service which has an impact on service quality and delivery of the organisation. In the current situation, the researcher has witnessed the KPK playing his role as a competent leader; effective manager, and diligent personnel in tackling this unprecedented situation. Indeed, teamwork is equally important, but without proper leadership qualities and competency the situation will become worse, and, no other Head of Departments (HODs) in the history of Malaysian Public Service (other than health and economics) over the past century have dealt with global crisis like today. This should be a concern to the three wise men in identifying the candidate who has a combination of operational and strategic mindset.

As a basis to measure competency in public service, countries especially advanced economies (also referred to first world countries) have introduced numerous mechanisms in determining the right talent to discharge their duties (Azmi, 2010). The United Kingdom pioneered competency practises as a basis for career advancement among civil servants. This is to ensure the degree of talent mismatch can be mitigated in an efficient and effective manner. However, based on studies conducted by prolific scholars, competency is, a basis for staff development, appraisal, reward, training, and salary revision, but countries' approach differs in measuring the performance and productivity of their civil servants. In Malaysia, competency is measured through recruitment and selection; training and development; performance management; and reward systems. The remuneration system or popularly known as *Sistem Saraan* formulated by PSD (in the collaboration with Ministries/Agencies) is supposed to act as the main reference for competency practises.

Previously, when Malaysian civil service was evolving mainly due to the industralisation policy introduced in the 1980s, many issues/problems and complaints arose due to poor service delivery particularly delays in delivery. This has led to the identification of core issues concerning the competency of civil servants which include a mismatch of talent, hence affecting service delivery quality; lack of innovation and creativity among public servants; high reliance on the private sector that has opened to corruption and abuse of power; and operational mindset that lacks strategic thinking.

Leaders' outlook has great influence over their subordinates and, attitudes towards changes will differ based on structural and tenure perspective. Competency involves of expertise (Muzam, 2023; Wong, 2020; Hood & Lodge, 2004), efficiency (Sudirman et al., 2019), and excellence (Hondeghem & Vandermeulen, 2000). Horton (2000) revealed that a competent civil servant is also one who is sensitive to political signals, able to solve issues and problems strategically, and look forward to being part of policy formulation and implementation in mitigating potential threat and problems. Judging from the number of COVID-19 cases to date, competent front liners are tested and it is measured in recovery effort by respective agencies. However, to what extent the leadership and competency of the civil service in general are operating at the pace of MOH nowadays is another concern of the relevant agency to investigate, particularly the PSD.

Political Leadership – Smooth Coordination Between Civil Service and Politics

Effective leadership is tested in times of crisis. In the past, wars, and crises were dealt with by delivering command using the top-down approach. Generals served as mechanics in materializing the strategies laid out by state leaders. Since COVID-19 is prescribed as a hidden enemy in this unprecedented war, old tactics require proactive modification in order to better function in this crisis. Political leadership during COVID-19 requires effective operationalisation of government in manifesting smooth coordination between its driver agencies[4]. In this aspect, the researcher was looking at coordination between the civil service and political actors in Malaysia. Important to note, COVID-19 began to strike when Malaysia was in the midst of a political crisis. Following the exit of BERSATU from Pakatan Harapan, the government coalition collapsed on February 23rd.

Globally, the inception of COVID-19 as the world pandemic as declared by the WHO took place on March 11. However, it has already brought down Wuhan and other Chinese provinces as early as January 2020. A critical point ought to be noted here - the absence of government for 7 days has clearly worsened the situation, though the Ministry of Health has been monitoring closely of the situation closely. The country has been dragged into this political turmoil, which neglects preventative measures for the virus. As a result, there was a spike of reported cases starting from March. Malaysia Institute of Economic Research (MIER) in using CG Model Assumptions elaborated on scenarios given the 4 weeks MCO period will affect the reduction in industrial output; outputs and trade rebound; and disequilibrium in labour market if economic activities dropped[5].

Health Director General Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah has taken the cue in coordinating the health workers to combat the battle. His job is not interrupted by political actors nor by other civil servants, ensuring a clear system of reporting from health care centres to the Ministry, subsequently from the Ministry to the people. Daily reporting at 1700 hours followed by press dialogues clearly enhance the chain of information from the Ministry to the people. Important to note, an aspect of political security deals with the chain of command. In Malaysia, Ministries are coordinated by Secretary Generals, which is also the highest position for a civil servant at the Ministry level. Director General, on the other hand, is specifically in charge for a unit, within the purview of the Ministry. In the case of the Ministry of Health, the Director General posits an equal rank to the Secretary-General, reporting to the Minister of Health.

As explained, the Director General within the purview of the Ministry is created to specifically in-charge of the operational matters of health services. Matters pertaining to health worker mobilisation, licensing, medical regulation, and health fall under the jurisdiction of the Director General. He or she will over-see adequacy of equipment resources and manpower for all health areas in the country, from the smallest health clinic (Klinik Kesihatan) to the largest specialist hospitals. The Secretary-General meanwhile, is tasked to look at the overview of the Ministry which covers budgeting, financial control, health policies, infrastructure development, and facilities regarding health in Malaysia. We could distinguish the Director General's focus area

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[4] Driving agencies in regard to COVID-19 in Malaysia include, the National Security Council (NSC), National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA), Civil Defence Force (or known as Angkatan Pertahanan Awam [APM]), as well as Armed Forces, Royal Malaysia Police and health workers.
[5] https://www.mier.org.my/the-economic-impacts-of-covid-19/

will be on the subject matter and operational, while the Secretary General focuses on the sustainability and policies of health in Malaysia. The separation of duty is to ensure no overlapping of jurisdiction and to prevent a high concentration of responsibilities towards a single individual. Furthermore, a Director General must be an accredited medical practitioner while a Secretary General, is a civil servant who does not necessarily possess medical accreditation and experience.

In the meantime, political actors complement Malaysian health governance to combat COVID-19. The Prime Minister, ever since being sworn, has released economic stimulation packages, aiming to assist the people who have been economically affected. The first, as announced on February 26th, 2020, lists a comprehensive package for health workers who served as the front liners followed by PRIHATIN focusing on more comprehensive cash-flows among the B40 and M40 (Kementerian Kewangan Malaysia, 2020). In terms of social mobility, Honourable Minister of Defence Ismail Sabri is seen communicating frequently with the people, on the Movement Control Order (MCO), mobilisation of the mass, as well as the presence of the military. MCO is regulated jointly with the Royal Malaysian Army and the Royal Police of Malaysia. We could not identify miscommunication between executive arms, political actors, and the civil service for the first two weeks of MCO. We acknowledged that political sentiment is put to a considerable level in social media as people are discussing on health, the MCO campaign, and the Stimulation Package.

We infer to the fact that COVID-19 has put Malaysia into a crisis management mode. The activation of such a mode is done through the Movement of Control Order declaration. Therefore, the Prime Minister's Office contends to the need of having a single source of information to avoid confusion and contradiction of statements. Malaysia could not afford to have clashes of command when it comes to handling national crisis. The public must adhere to a single source of command, to ensure a high level of compliance with government's orders. Two observations could be offered when studying Malaysia's chain of command during COVID-19. Four senior ministers were appointed to oversee critical cluster for the country. The appointment was made even before the MCO is gazette. On paper, the country is rest assured as senior ministers are experienced political actors who are tasked with critical clusters for the country. Senior Minister Azmin Ali has announced on partial lift to selected industries. He claimed the lift is to ensure the country's economy is still on track, besides benefitting the public in need. His announcement invites perplexed feelings. Hair styling businesses should not be counted as necessary industries and must remain closed according to experts. We are suggesting the fact that public sentiment has a way to influent political decisions. Another observation could be made to Senior Minister Radzi Jidin. After a month, he made his public appearance to announce the cancellation of the UPSR and PT3 national exams, while *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* (STPM), and *Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia* (STAM) postponed to the first quarter of 2021. Such announcements come timely. Other Ministries are seen to be in a quiet zone, which is believed to direct the attention of the people to Majlis Keselamatan Negara and the Ministry of Health.

The second observation encircles the implementation of special measures on RMO. To date, five areas are gazetted as enhanced MCO. This includes Simpang Renggam, Hulu Langat, a condominium in Kuala Lumpur, Malayan Mansion, and Selangor Mansion buildings in Kuala Lumpur. First, one should understand the source of power for MCO. Section 11 (1) of the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 gives the Minister the authority to

gazette an area which infected by disease. The gazetted area, according to Section 11 (2), shall prescribe the measures in preventing the spread of any infectious disease in and out. The measures, as prescribed in Section 11 (3), include:

a) to treatment or immunisation.
b) to isolation, observation, or surveillance, the period of which being specified according to circumstances; or
c) to any other measures as the authorised officer considers necessary to control the disease.

By virtue of Section 11 (1), (2), and (3), the Health Minister is allowed to gazette RMO to identified areas. However, looking at the exponential growth of COVID-19, coupled with WHO declaration that it is now a pandemic, RMO has to be applied in the country throughout. Section 11 (1), (2), and (3) will not give the power to a Minister to declare RMO prescription countrywide. Therefore, stronger coordination among the authority is needed, by relying on the National Security Council (NSC). NSC shall be presided over by the Prime Minister, Ministers of Defence and Communications and Multimedia, Home Minister, the Inspector General of Police, Chiefs of Defence, and Secretary. The Council, by virtue of Order 20 defines catastrophe (*bencana*) as *disruption to the society's activities and national matters, resulting in death and property damage, economic recession, and environmental degradation which exceed the capacity of the society to overcome*. COVID-19 goes beyond the capacity of the society or a single ministry to handle, which needs national measures to intervene. Twelve kinds of catastrophes are listed in Order 20, which also include the unmitigable spreading of infectious disease. COVID-19 is justified under Order 20 which gives the government the mandate to enforce RMO country-wide, with enhanced RMO in five areas.

It is important to note, NSC serves as a Council. It is not an institution, which has sufficient numbers of staff to coordinate and monitor country-wide. NSC delegates the operational control to National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA) as a policy-making organisation and Civil Defence Force (APM) as state operationable units during RMO. Having MKN, NADMA, and JPAM (at the state level), while in theory complement each other, lacks of a codified command control. Three agencies, though it is ranked hierarchically (APM to NADMA to MKN), have risks of overlapping. Simpang Renggam and Hulu Langat (areas gazetted to be enhanced MCO) face lockdown for several weeks. Armed forces are deployed (under NSC) besides the presence of APM, to be regulated by policies written by NADMA. Each is reporting to their own chain of command, giving rise to multiple chains of command in times of national catastrophe.

While the situation is under control and not seen to be a clash of authorities, in terms of political leadership, such practice is much discouraged. Buzan (1991) believes political security concerns the 'organisational stability of states systems of government and the ideologies that give them legitimacy.' Guedas de Costa (2008) offers two converging points in understanding recent political security. 'One aspect measures the degree of participation by all in legitimate decision-making processes of a society, under and protected rules of stable laws.' Another converging point connotes the broad scope of governing activities which include voting and separation of powers, accountability of elected individuals and bureaucrats; from the protection of human rights and government stability to access to economic benefits.'

These literatures suggest a framework of political security utilised in the absence of a major crisis. The rising pandemic outbreak from 1961 up to 2020 requires a new construction of political security. The common definition of political security is not tested in times of crisis. This discussion argues such definition has to be altered in generating a new literature of political security in times of crisis. In this paper, we adopt political leadership as a model to understand Malaysia's response to undermining COVID-19. Political leadership allows for the synergies within a community to drive politics in solving the common denominating issue of society. Torfing and Sørensen (2019) describe political leadership as an 'identification and definition of problem and challenges that call for a public action.' Politics, in this regard should not be seen as a hierarchical relationship with a top-down approach, but a collective action of all community actors to produce comprehensive and robust mechanics for a major issue in the society. Interestingly yet provoking enough, issues and catastrophes should not be viewed as baggage to politicians and the community. Instead, it can be a public venue as it provides rooms for coordinating leadership of political actors and others (including public service and civil societies.) When issues be translated as a public value, public value serves as a game changer that will be utilised by proponents of political leadership.

The new phenomenon of constructive political leadership challenges the predominant sovereign-styled political leadership. In a European case study as a baseline, 'there is a strong tendency for politicians elected for parliamentary assembled at various levels of government to be locked into time-consuming political committee work, technocratic policy-making processes, forums for administrative oversight and mediatized political blame-games while simultaneous being locked out of key policy-formulating networks and attempts to meta govern such networks (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Koppenjan et al., 2009). In Malaysia, ministers align closely with the direction of their respective ministries. Public servants in the ministries will conduct a groundwork analysis for the endorsement of the ministers as the highest-ranked officer.

Political leadership requires ministers i.e. political actors to perform more than these duties. Ansell and Gash (2018) believe that elected politicians may develop new and better policy solutions through problem-focused interaction with relevant and affected actors from the economy and civil society. COVID-19 in Malaysia, as explained above demonstrated a coordinated effort of the newly appointed government to synergize with civil service, especially the Ministry of Health, in undermining the pandemic outbreak. Health coordination is given mostly to the Director General of MOH, while Senior Minister of Defence Ismail Sabri is tasked to convey important announcements from the NSC. This does not reduce the influence of political actors. Torfing and Sørensen (2019, p. 8) believe 'politicians still have the formal powers to set the agenda and initiate policy making, to decide who should be involved, when and how, and to reject, amend or approve the outcomes of collaborative policy interaction'. In Malaysia, the National Security Council is chaired by the Prime Minister along with the Senior Minister of Defence.

What is lacking, however, is the interactive political leadership, when 'elected politicians may develop new and better policy solutions through a problem-focused interaction with relevant and affected actors for the economy and civil society' (Torfing & Sørensen (2019). COVID-19 creates an avenue in which a global pandemic can be approached as a public value i.e. to be utilised by politicians to increase their leadership and standing in Malaysia. Politicians in COVID-19, as well as demonstrated in the world's major catastrophe are torn between populist

moves and worth needed actions. On one hand, decisions have to be made consistent with the national interest. On the other, decisions have to be made to uplift the political survival of every politician. McFarland (1987) warns political actors that 'positive impact of multi-actor collaboration on the exercise of political leadership cannot conceal the risk of interest capture in collaborative arenas that can make political leaders look weak and defeated'. In this aspect, politicians should choose the battle well and be able to provide an approach to the issue with a winning strategy, both for the public as well as for their political leverage.

We have analysed the behaviour of civil service and political actors in Malaysia combating COVID-19. We conclude that the trend of speaking with one voice (among all actors) demonstrates political leadership in times of crisis. It is the outcome of a clear coordination from all levels, which delivers a unity of action and conscience. The case study of Malaysian governance battling with COVID-19 would be a good start. Future research entails comparative studies of governments in facing and battling COVID-19. Concluding political leadership, it is imperative to analyse this concept vis a vis pandemic outbreak in Malaysia. The literature on political security seems inapt to describe the concept in times of pandemics and crises. Each country has its own way of handling COVID-19. This would add to the diversity in the political leadership literature review, post-COVID-19. Health experts believe a series of pandemics will be the following trend. From the Spanish Flu in 1938 to the recent COVID-19, the human population is not immune from any pandemics despite technological advancement (Petit & Longo. 2023).

Results and Recommendation

Policy Recommendation

Formulation of Disaster Management Act 2020

MKN 20 may be a tool to coordinate and manage actors during the crisis, but to what extent it is effective is another question to deal with. We have witnessed incidents that cannot be operationalised simply due to limitations of trans agency laws and procedures. The National Security Council or MKN structure must be revisited with a fresh and sound approach to dealing with future uncertainties. Knowledge and competency do not mean tenure or longevity of a person in the agency, but how effective and technically sound a person is when disaster strikes, regardless of years of service in any Ministry or agency.

Therefore, the government should expedite the formulation of the Disaster Management Act post-COVID-19. This document will be the single point of reference cross-agency in the event of a disaster. Four main categories[6] defined in MKN 20 can be clustered with punitive elements. In addition, the Act will also strengthen the local government structure with proper SOP in any pandemic or pandemic. It will define clearly the demarcation roles and functions of all agencies in mitigating impediments, besides a strategic communication plan[7] that will streamline job functions during a crisis.

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[6] *Four categories of disaster are Communicable Disease/Pandemic; Mass Casualty Incident (MCI); Chemical, Radiology and Nuclear; and Natural disaster*

[7] https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2020/03/671499/covid-19-operasi-nyah-cemar-tidak-ikut-sop-kkm

Role of Adaptive Leader in Future Public Service Operation

Human capital in the services was tested in numerous 'incidents' that mature the institution with mistakes and corrections. Recognising that higher management positions in the Malaysian Public Service are aging - without the proper strategic or existing succession - the Public Service Department (PSD) has taken the initiative by benchmarking with other countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, for them to find solutions and best possible way to mitigate the problem. To date, no one has succeeded, as political pressures and demands for political leadership have disrupted the process of replacing leadership in the management of the public sector.

Therefore, leadership and competency are effective when the structure is clearly defined in an organisation (Muzam, 2023). Clear demarcation between civil servants and political masters can elevate governance to the highest quality of administration. The civil service or public service of Malaysia is an aging institution. Ministries and agencies must put their ears on the ground to ensure programs and projects are implemented in accordance with the on-the-ground sentiment. The implementation of inculcation of the Adaptive Leadership program must be the essence of Public Service in Malaysia post COVID-19. The complexity of society added with uncertain economic prospects will make business no longer as usual. The leadership approach must also be adaptive (McKimm et al., 2023; Soni et al., 2023; Derue, 2011) and sensitive to the stakeholders needs and wants.

Hierarchical leadership will no longer be relevant in the future due to the strenuous situation in today world (Kouzes & Posner, 2021). The public at-large are more literate hence creative in facing problems without relying so much on authority. If leaders in the civil service fail to put their ears on the ground and still live in the past, many programs and initiatives will be a waste of public money with a certain quartet of people benefit and embrace. Traditionally hierarchical structure determines who is leading and who is following. When a person is structurally located, he/she will automatically be given peers to determine the direction of a unit, department, agency, or Ministry. Interaction becomes the most important tool to achieve the vision and mission of the organisation and without proper communication coaching, adaptive leadership can be irrelevant to spearhead the country's developmental agenda and this includes crisis management.

With the projection by the World Bank that Malaysia will suffer -0.1% growth, the new economy will emerge with many players on the street thus new problems arise. The public service must also take advantage of the political impasse between the two coalition parties by introducing initiatives that would be able to uplift civil service standards by preparing modules for adaptive leaders and managers.

Upskilling Human Capital

As the engine of economic growth, SMEs are in fact badly affected. The Institute for Democratic and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) has distinguished how Malaysia and Singapore score on the type of assistance given to the SMEs in both state's stimulus packages. Five key areas[8] were identified namely Loans and Financing; Operating Cash Flow; Tax Relief;

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[8] *Ratio between Malaysia and Singapore based on Key Result Areas are summarise as follows: 36%:14% for Loans and financing; 27%:24% for Operating Cash flow; 23%:5% for Tax Relief; 5%:33% for Upskilling; and 9%:24% for Wage Subsidy.*

Upskilling; and Wage Subsidy to mitigate current problems. It is short-term in nature, but SMEs are expected to creatively turn around their business operation in the coming months with a strategic "exit plan". The government as a facilitator should continue easing the business community in dealing with processes and procedures, licensing and permits and etcetera. From now on SMEs must be more responsible in doing business by putting society first rather than personal interest in their balance sheet. Singapore in weathering the crisis, has focused on building resilience for the whole ecosystem. Allocating high budget for upskilling to their SMEs and another economic cluster, proves that human capital is the essence of economic survival.

Conclusion

One major purpose of this article on the civil service of Malaysia is to critique the leadership and competency readiness of the HOD not related to the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic can be a launch pad for the three wise men i.e., Chief Secretary to the Government or *Ketua Setiausaha Negara* (KSN), Director General of Public Service or *Ketua Pengarah Perkhidmatan Awam* (KPPA), and Secretary General of Treasury or *Ketua Setiausaha Perbendaharaan* (KSP) to relook the succession planning mechanism hence managing scarce resources in the right manner to avoid negligence, omission and mismanagement of public fund. This is the opportune time for the civil service to engage with the intellectuals and experts in determining strategic modules and packages for leaders of tomorrow. Tributes to the frontline's will not only center on crisis managers but public management as one. In conclusion, politicians come and go, but, civil service lasts forever.

Acknowlededgment

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