

One War, Many Battles: COVID-19 in Urban Southeast Asia

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By any metric, COVID-19 has disrupted Southeast Asia immensely, affecting even those countries that have fared comparatively well. Master narratives of the course of the pandemic across the region have been inescapable; which countries sprang into action and which lost time in denial or dithering; which implemented testing

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and contact-tracing and which remain short on tests and strategies even now; where the death toll and economic costs have been devastating and where they have not been quite so terrible.¹ The latest plot-lines in these unfolding dramas address when and from where vaccines are being secured, how effective authorities are in distributing them to their respective populations, and how they are preparing for and responding to new waves of infection.

These national stories dominate media coverage—including among domestic media—but what is often missing is the great variety of subnational experiences. In most of the states of Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, managing the pandemic is at least partly (and often largely) a decentralized and localized affair, with regions within a single country sometimes varying greatly in both the relative impact of the pandemic and in government and societal efforts to manage it and ameliorate its effects. National plans, directives, and statistics matter, but individuals have experienced this pandemic on the ground, where central regulations meet local implementation. Local actors can mobilize to implement, amplify, or subvert official directives from the centre. And it is at the local level where we observe the biggest gaps between aspirations and outcomes, as health workers deal with patients and communities, and workers and businesses struggle with the economic repercussions of the pandemic.

The essays that follow aim to deepen understanding of the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia, specifically in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, shifting from the national level and instead looking closely at experiences in 13 urban centres across the region. The authors of the Roundtable, most of whom are writing from the vantage of their own communities, and with the benefit of what creatively arranged field research they could safely accomplish, offer a range of novel perspectives on experiences of the pandemic in the region. Taken as a whole, the articles highlight the salience of local governance and local context to pandemic management and response. In particular, these pieces also address one overarching theme as well as providing other invaluable perspectives.

The overarching theme is the major divergence in both government capacity and the character of central-local relations. On the relatively more sanguine end of the spectrum, several of our authors describe broadly positive interactions and effective collaboration between national and local authorities. Towards the middle of the spectrum are those cases in which relations are more compensatory: local strengths offset weakness at the centre or vice-

versa. Far more deleterious outcomes emerge from those situations in which neither centre nor city proves able to mount an effective response to the pandemic, and/or where the two are in conflict about how best to proceed.

We must emphasize at the outset that this Roundtable does not purport to capture a representative sample of pandemic responses as they have evolved in urban areas across the four countries; rather, we have invited a range of authors to contribute vignettes about particular issues that have emerged in settings that they are already studying.² We fully recognize, therefore, that this collection contributes to a topic that deserves a great deal more ongoing study in the years to come.

It is in Thailand that we find some of the prime examples of how government capacity and central-local political dynamics work to positive effect. In their study of Khon Kaen Province, Sirisak Laochankham, Peerasit Kamnuansilpa, and Grichawat Lowatcharin argue that a well-coordinated national strategy coupled with a degree of devolved autonomy has thus far proven especially effective in dealing with the pandemic. Hatchakorn Vongsayan and Viengrat Nethipo, comparing experiences in Rangsit and Chiang Mai, find that even in quite different urban contexts—and places politically out of joint with the central government—strong institutional capacity and public health outreach allow for an effective devolved response. The national government has played a key role in coordinating the flow of information, they explain, while at the same time providing resources and leeway to local governments, allowing them “to respond to the pandemic in an agile and effective way”. Writing on Nakhon Si Thammarat, Amporn Marddent and Vithaya Arporn likewise acknowledge the role of the central government in providing overall direction, but put the major focus on ground-level efforts. They particularly call out the crucial role of village health volunteers who leverage their relationships with local communities to implement, supplement, and lend credibility to government-run health initiatives.

Elsewhere, we can see compensatory processes in play. Focusing on Salatiga, in Central Java, Rebecca Meckelburg examines a locality that was able to contain the pandemic reasonably well as the central government remained fixated on economic impacts and seemed unprepared to deal seriously with the national scope of the public-health emergency. In the breach, it was up to the local government and civil society organizations to respond to the health concerns of those directly affected, take steps to stop the

spread, and provide welfare assistance to those most in need. Chris Morris sees a moment such as this exposing the trade-offs inherent in Indonesia's framework for pandemic response, which centralizes authority over the imposition of critical public health measures: Jakarta's city government was ready to take more decisive action than the waffling central state preferred, but the latter dragged down the city's pace without presenting a coordinated better option. Overall, he concludes, the Indonesian government "displayed a curious knack for intervention where greater regional discretion may have been appropriate, while absenting itself where a more active coordinating role would have been beneficial". In the Philippines, an early attempt at strong central coordination merely exposed a high degree of central government incompetence. As Juhn Chris Espia, Weena Gera, and Rosalie Arcala Hall conclude, "The pressure to gradually open the economy, and the dismal results in reducing the rate of infections based on national initiatives, eventually resulted in the [national pandemic task force] ceding much of its decision-making power to local governments." Not surprisingly, as in Indonesia, outcomes in the Philippines have varied a great deal from one setting to another.

This leads us into cases that exhibit major shortcomings at both the national and the local levels. While Iloilo in the central Philippines was able to manoeuvre with some effectiveness within the national framework, Espia, Gera, and Hall explain, nearby Cebu used its close ties to the presidential palace to short-circuit national processes—leading to a disastrous spike in cases, which ironically necessitated a particularly heavy-handed national response involving army tanks on city streets. Haryanto examines particularly damaging political dynamics, too, in Makassar, Indonesia. While the national government failed to provide adequate overall coordination across the archipelago, the local government was dragged down by rivalries and in-fighting among leading politicians. As the city faced a growing pandemic, it also witnessed angry mobs stealing corpses from hospitals and mounting blockades against medical workers, the police training water hoses at some shops and small businesses that refused to comply with closure orders, and a general disregard for public health measures. All the key ingredients of effective pandemic response, as identified by Francis Fukuyama, were notable in their absence: "state capacity, social trust, and leadership".³

Mary Joyce Bulao and Rolan Jon Bulao offer a different lens on intergovernmental relations, addressing issues of horizontal rather than vertical coordination. Their focus is on the Metro

Naga Development Council, which has transformed itself from an institution for development coordination into one able to play a valuable role in resolving pandemic-related issues that have arisen between Naga City and its neighbouring municipalities in the Bicol peninsula southeast of Manila. Soon after the outbreak of COVID-19, local officials commonly responded by imposing border controls. But this strategy did not take into account the extensive movement of people and goods across political jurisdictions, necessitating a forum for balancing health and economic concerns. Through a process of “institutional layering”, a pre-existing organization was brought off the shelf and re-jiggered in the service of present needs.

As important as issues of state capacity and coordination clearly are, the contributions to this Roundtable address other critical issues as well. Several highlight how other actors may also play key roles, augmenting a strong response or making up for what state or local governments miss or mangle. While Meckelburg addresses the role of civil society organizations in working alongside Salatiga’s local authorities, Azmil Tayeb and Por Heong Hong examine how counterparts in Penang, Malaysia have mobilized to support refugee and migrant communities that the state deems beyond its purview. Government persecution or, at best, neglect, has deprived these communities of their human rights. In addition, their members have suffered the effects of stay-home orders, shutdowns, and a generalized economic downturn without the benefit of the state relief enjoyed by citizens. Local citizens and their allies within the Penang state government, coaxed into action, have reinterpreted the boundaries of the “community” rather than accept the central state’s mandate. We see elsewhere, too, the risks of focusing too narrowly on state efforts in understanding experiences of the pandemic. The Khon Kaen case, for example, shows also the role of local businesses, working in tandem with local government; as in Salatiga, moreover, citizen action has played an important part. Meanwhile, the discussion of spiritual strategies for dealing with the pandemic in Nakhon Si Thammarat reminds us of further resources that lay outside of the state. A singular focus on government performance, in short, cannot suffice.

But the state remains key—not just its capacity and alignment across tiers, or its blind spots (viz., for refugees and migrant workers in Penang), but also in how its networks are used for electoral purposes. Ngu Ik Tien’s examination of food aid programmes in Sibü, in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, illustrates how the pandemic has brought new opportunities for old practices. Politicians

across the region have a record of seeking to claim credit for what good their governments do and of currying electoral support through patronage.⁴ Those tendencies have not evaporated—and the sudden influx of resources for aid packages has put more emphasis on speed than on ensuring controls against abuse are in place. Ruling parties gain advantage while opposition parties complain about being marginalized. Still, politicking can also spur positive results, as we see in the comparison of Chiang Mai and Rangsit. Local politicians in both have invested in local healthcare capacity, including a network of village health volunteers, with an eye to boosting their future electoral prospects. These programmes provide opportunities for dispensing patronage and building patronage networks, but better healthcare remains an extraordinarily important public good, whoever claims credit for its provision.

Cleo Calimbahin observes a somewhat different kind of political advantage in the City of Manila, where a new mayor is quite effectively using digital communications to project his achievements in the fight against the pandemic, “in contrast to the slow and inadequate response of the national government”. This public relations effort reaches a broad audience that extends well beyond Manileños alone. In the short term, the broadcasting of his achievements from the nation’s capital to the national stage allows “Mayor Isko” to cultivate support from top conglomerates and obtain goodies that he can then dole out to his constituents. Over a longer time horizon, this projection of mayoral performance places him prominently among those viewed as possible future contenders for the top offices of the land.

As of this writing, the COVID-19 pandemic rages on across Southeast Asia; though some states continue to perform remarkably well, a second or third round of lockdowns is only now settling in, and vaccine rollouts have barely begun. Current estimates are for the region’s macro-level economic recovery to start in 2021—albeit with still potentially devastating long-term effects in terms of rising poverty and inequality in particular—but for the virus to linger longer.⁵ We hope the contributions in this Roundtable will not only encourage ongoing attention to the political dynamics and impact of the pandemic across the region—that seems assured—but also promote analysis with a more contextualized, ground-up focus. This complex, protracted crisis helps lay bare the virtues and shortcomings of central governance, the potentials and problems of local administration, and where citizens themselves can fill the breach.

NOTES

- ¹ The United States-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has maintained an updated “Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker” throughout the pandemic, with statistics on cases, deaths, and economic projections, as well as timelines of government public health and economic responses in, plus international assistance provided to or from, each state. See <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0>.
- ² Most of the authors in this Roundtable are part of an Australian Research Council Discovery Project entitled “Local Politics, Governance and Public Goods in Southeast Asia” (DP180101148).
- ³ Francis Fukuyama, “The Pandemic and Political Order: It Takes a State”, *Foreign Affairs* (July–August 2020): 26.
- ⁴ We address these practices in a forthcoming book, *Patronage Politics in Southeast Asia: Money, Machines, and Networks* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- ⁵ See, for example, Asian Development Bank, “Asian Development Outlook (ADO) 2020 Supplement: Paths Diverge in Recovery from the Pandemic”, December 2020, <https://www.adb.org/publications/ado-supplement-december-2020>; World Bank, “From Containment to Recovery”, October 2020, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34497/9781464816413.pdf>.

Xenophobia and COVID-19 Aid to Refugee and Migrant Communities in Penang

AZMIL TAYEB AND POR HEONG HONG

On 18 March 2020, the Malaysian government announced a Movement Control Order (MCO) in an attempt to contain a rise in COVID-19 cases across the country. The MCO compliance rate was near-universal and the hashtag #kitajagakita (we look after us) trended as Malaysians from all walks of life came together to face the scourge of the pandemic. Amid these efforts, in mid-April, a rickety boat of more than 200 Rohingya refugees tried to land on the island of Langkawi in northern Malaysia. Ultimately, the authorities turned the boat away. The episode triggered a vicious wave of xenophobia among a broad cross-section of society, directed towards Rohingya refugees already staying in Malaysia. Prior to this, the Rohingya had been generally welcomed in Malaysia and had never encountered such rancour. The federal government actively supported this sentiment, so much so that current and former immigration and intelligence officers set up Facebook pages where the public could denigrate and report on Rohingya refugees (Facebook later took down these pages).¹ Angry calls emerged to deport them back to Myanmar or Bangladesh. The authorities went so far as to round up hundreds

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of Rohingya, along with undocumented migrant workers, detaining them in special facilities for the purpose of “containment”. It was apparent to many Malaysians, including the federal government, that *#kitajagakita* only applied to citizens. Non-citizens, including refugees and migrant workers, were deprived of their livelihoods and were left to fend for themselves during the three-month MCO. Simply put, helping refugees and migrant workers during the MCO was not a popular policy, especially at the federal level.

However, pockets of humanity persisted amid the miasma of xenophobia that pervaded every part of the country during the MCO (and until today). In Penang, a concerted and well-organized effort emerged—supported to a certain degree by the state government—to help refugees and migrant workers. In this article we argue that despite the enormous challenge that the pervasive xenophobic sentiment among the general Malaysian public presented, this effort to provide aid to refugees, and to a lesser extent migrant workers, proved successful, particularly in comparison to other regions in Malaysia with similarly large refugee and migrant communities such as the East Malaysian state of Sabah and the Klang Valley area that encompasses Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The success can be primarily attributed to the strong civil society network in Penang that identified early on in the MCO the looming humanitarian crisis among the refugee and migrant communities and managed to mobilize their resources before the start of the xenophobic wave in mid-April 2020. The fact that Penang is led by the coalition in opposition at the federal level was not a major factor in easing the delivery of aid to these vulnerable communities since xenophobic sentiment cut across the partisan divide, although the state government facilitated civil-societal efforts to a limited extent.

Mobilization Efforts to Benefit Refugees

In early March 2020, even before the MCO was announced, civil society organizations formed a Penang Working Group that included the Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign/ASPIRE Penang (PSHTC/ASPIRE), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) and leaders of refugee communities, in anticipation of potential hardship within the refugee communities resulting from the impending MCO. As of March 2020, Penang alone had 18,660 officially registered refugees, 80 per cent of whom were Rohingya. These refugees comprised around 3,500 families, including 5,000 children, and about 8,000 single men. Women made up 30 per

cent of the total.² On 11 April 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Malaysia established a WhatsApp Coordinating Group in Penang that included members of the aforementioned Penang Working Group and other civil society groups such as Caremongers Penang, Mercy Malaysia, Malaysia Relief Agency, Global Development Association, Tzu Chi (a Buddhist humanitarian organization) and others. In short, when the federal government imposed the MCO, civil society groups in Penang were ready to deal with its expected deleterious fallout among refugee and migrant communities.

While these civil society groups were well equipped with information, mainly from working closely with refugee community leaders and the UNHCR, they were woefully short on resources, particularly for aid, whether food parcels or cash handouts. PSHTC/ASPIRE launched a fundraising campaign to solicit donations from the general public. Despite the toxic environment for refugees and migrant workers, PSHTC/ASPIRE managed to raise almost RM200,000 (US\$50,000) by the end of July 2020, half of which was contributed by the Penang state government on 14 April 2020.³ The relatively sizable contribution from the state government came as a pleasant surprise, a testament to the long-standing activism of civil society groups in Penang and an open channel of communication they had with the state government.⁴ An outpouring of RM10 (US\$2.50), RM20 (US\$5) and RM50 (US\$12) donations made up most of the rest of the funds raised.

The civil society network delivered the aid either to specially designated collection points—usually located in areas where many refugees reside—or door-to-door. A collective of young activists called “Love Your Neighbour Penang Covid19” (hereafter LYNPC) collaborated with the online supermarket Hong Hong to allow donors to buy food directly from Hong Hong, which it then delivered free of charge to refugee communities.⁵ LYNPC made the decision to deliver aid exclusively in the form of food parcels to avoid handling large cash donations, especially since, as an ad hoc group yet to be registered by the Registrar of Societies, it was not allowed to open a bank account. It also worked closely with PSHTC/ASPIRE to deliver aid since the latter was better connected with the refugee communities and would refer cases to LYNPC.⁶

However, hostile elements in local communities often disrupted the delivery of aid by trying to intimidate volunteers as they distributed food parcels. For this reason PSHTC/ASPIRE switched to cash aid since it was less conspicuous than stacks of food parcels.

One alternative way to circumvent the backlash from the local community was to deliver food parcels through the local mosque. An elected official, for instance, took this route when assisting 250 Rohingya refugees living in her constituency.⁷

Despite these challenges, LYNPC successfully delivered food parcels to about 400 refugee families during the MCO, while PSHTC/ASPIRE and other civil society groups helped the rest. Refugee families received several small cash handouts that amounted to an average of RM200 (US\$50) per family by the end of July. It was not nearly enough, considering that the poverty line in Malaysia had just been revised from RM908 (US\$225) to RM2,208 (US\$547) per month in July 2020. Nonetheless, refugee families managed to stretch out this meagre amount over the perilous four-month period.⁸ In all, civil society groups managed to reach every refugee family and individual in Penang and provide them with some form of assistance to help them get through the difficult MCO period.

Less Success in Reaching Migrants

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for aid delivery to migrant communities. Migrant workers, especially undocumented ones, tend to be more geographically dispersed than refugees. At the latest count, there were 135,490 documented migrant workers in Penang.⁹ Many migrant workers live among the locals in low-cost flats, which makes keeping track of them difficult. Undocumented migrant workers, who were already living off the grid, so to speak, before the pandemic due to their illegal status, went deeper into hiding during the MCO. Many who work and live in makeshift containers at the numerous construction sites that dot Penang Island were trapped there when work stopped and were too fearful to go out to seek help lest the authorities arrest them.

Civil society groups found it especially difficult to deliver aid to migrant workers since there was no organized and centralized way to help them.¹⁰ Employers were supposed to take care of their migrant workers during the MCO, but many companies shirked their responsibilities because there was no oversight by the local authorities; they left migrant workers to fend for themselves. Many survived by tapping into their country network of fellow migrant workers or reaching out to local communities for help. The Indonesian embassy, for instance, actively helped its citizens during the MCO and was a major source of relief for Indonesian migrant workers.¹¹ Conversely, the Bangladeshi and Nepali embassies did not provide

much aid to their citizens in Penang. Ahupathi (a pseudonym), a 28-year-old Nepali security guard working at an apartment complex in the Gelugor area, lamented that neither he nor his friends received any assistance from the Nepali embassy during the MCO. He managed to survive simply because his job was considered an essential service, so he was allowed to work during the MCO.¹² Many migrant workers, particularly undocumented ones, fared much worse than Ahupathi.

Now, six months after the conclusion of the MCO, we can see that decisive and timely action by numerous civil society groups prevented a humanitarian disaster among the refugee communities and, to a lesser extent, the migrant communities in Penang. This successful effort was only possible because of a strong civil society network, a state government that was open to working with civil society groups (though within strict political limitations imposed by internal disagreements and the pervasive xenophobic sentiment among the general population) and numerous concerned citizens who rose to the occasion to aid the unfortunate. The hardship the COVID-19 pandemic has created has certainly brought out the worst and the best in people, manifested in hateful sentiment against refugees and migrant workers or in the selfless acts of Good Samaritans who brave toxic public opinion to help others in the name of common humanity. In Penang, it is the latter inclination that has ultimately prevailed.

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- ¹ “Anti-Rohingya Sentiment Rears Ugly Head on Facebook as Covid-19 Fear Grips Malaysia”, *Malay Mail*, 14 October 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/10/14/anti-rohingya-sentiment-rears-ugly-head-on-facebook-as-covid-19-fear-grips/1912531>; “Ismail Sabri: Wristbands for Migrants Just a Proposal, Will be Presented to Security Council Today”, *Malay Mail*, 20 November 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/11/20/ismail-sabri-wristband-for-migrants-just-a-proposal-will-be-presented-to-se/1924384>.
- ² “Supporting Refugees in Penang in the Time of COVID19: Affirming the Power of Refugee Leadership and Community Networks, Affirming the Positives of Collaboration”, *A Report from Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign and ASPIRE Penang* (June 2020), p. 3, <http://aprrn.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PSHTC-Report-on-refugees-in-Penang-C19-090620.pdf>.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ⁴ That is not to say that the state government is free from xenophobia. According to a member of a civil society group involved in the lobbying effort, there was a deep division within the state government over whether to help the refugees

because some DAP members did not see doing so as a popular political move. In the end, the Chief Minister agreed on the RM100,000 (US\$25,000) amount, which civil society groups saw as “supportive but not too supportive”, in a clear attempt to appease all parties. Author interview with Tobias (a pseudonym), a civil society activist, Penang, 27 November 2020.

- ⁵ “Love Your Neighbour Penang Covid19” actively solicited donations and voluntary help on social media, especially Facebook, <https://m.facebook.com/loveyourneighbourpenangc19/>; Hong Hong’s online supermarket can be accessed here: <https://www.honghong-online.com/>.
- ⁶ Author interview with Mat Pon and Ayu (both pseudonyms), husband and wife volunteers for Love Your Neighbour Penang Covid19, Penang, 26 November 2020.
- ⁷ Author interview with Syerleena Abdul Rashid, State Assemblyperson for Seri Delima, Penang, 29 November 2020.
- ⁸ All local refugees and undocumented migrant workers are daily-wage earners working in restaurants, construction sites, and providing cleaning services. The stop-work order during the MCO meant a total loss of income for them. Author interview with Tobias (a pseudonym), a civil society activist, 27 November 2020.
- ⁹ “6,700 Foreign Workers Screened in Penang so far”, *The Star*, 27 May 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/05/27/6700-foreign-workers-in-penang-screened-so-far>.
- ¹⁰ According to Tobias (a pseudonym), a civil society activist, most aid provided to migrant workers was purely by chance. Volunteers who stumbled across migrant workers surreptitiously searching for food would ask if they needed help. Author interview, 27 November 2020.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Author interview with Ahupathi (a pseudonym), a Nepali security guard, Penang, 28 November 2020.