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Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk), Diego Maiorano (dmaiorano@unior.it); book reviews should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com).



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MALAYSIA 2021: A WIDENING POLITICAL LEGITIMACY CRISIS

Emanuela Mangiarotti

University of Pavia
emanuela.mangiarotti@unipv.it

In 2021, Malaysia saw the deepening of a political legitimacy deficit as demands for reforms and political change remained largely unattended. The first half of the year was marked by a state of emergency, declared by the government in the face of a new wave of COVID-19 infections. Amid the persisting health crisis and its adverse socio-economic effects, mounting public frustration found expression in online and offline collective mobilizations. Meanwhile, power struggles within the ruling coalition led to a fresh change of government. Then, in December, unprecedented floods ravaged the country's most industrialized region. In that context, a new wave of public outrage rose against the government's sluggish response to the disaster. As the country's economic downturn continued to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable social groups, and the political elites appeared incapable of addressing pressing policy issues, Malaysia witnessed the growth of youth-led activism with an appetite for political change.

KEYWORDS – Malaysia; political legitimacy; COVID-19; youth activism; social media.

1. Introduction

At the end of 2020, observers of Malaysian politics noted how the political instability induced by power struggles within and between party coalitions underscored a growing trust deficit between the people and the political elite.¹ However, demands to end the cronyism and corruption that tainted Malaysian institutional functioning and political processes remained largely unattended. The 2018 national election had marked the demise of the Barisan Nasional (BS), a government coalition dominated by the Malay-centred UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), Malaysia's longstanding ruling party. In its place, voters favoured the multi-ethnic Pakatan Harapan (PH), a coalition led by the Bersatu party. At the time, there was hope that the PH's historic win would herald a new era of reforms, relieving Malaysia

1. Saleena Saleem, 'Malaysia 2019: The Politics of Fear and UMNO's Renewed Relevance', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019, pp. 241-258; Azmil Tayeb, 'Malaysia in 2020. Fragile Coalitional Politics and Democratic Regression', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 61, Part 1, pp. 99-105.

from a corruption-ridden, and highly ethnicized political praxis.² Instead, the PH coalition government was brought down in February 2020 after 22 months marked by political infighting, backdoor dealings and defections. The Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance – PN), an unstable coalition including Bersatu, UMNO, the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), and other partners, assumed power with an all-Malay government. Muhyiddin Yassin, who had served as the Minister of Home Affairs in the PH government, became Malaysia's new prime minister. Quite soon, the new ruling coalition proved unable to meet public aspirations for more stability. Amid the pandemic's devastating socio-economic impact, a self-absorbed political elite neglected signs of mounting public frustration.³ The latter found expressions in a number of online and offline collective mobilizations in mid-2021, in defiance of pandemic-induced restrictions.

This article highlights those crucial developments that, in 2021, contributed to a deepening political legitimacy crisis in Malaysia, as political practices and the government's policy outputs came under closer public scrutiny. The first part introduces three intertwined issues that, starting from January 2021, have affected Malaysian public life: the first is the pandemic-related emergency proclamation, with the suspension of democratic processes; the second is the collective action that channelled a mounting public discontent with the government's response to the pandemic-induced socio-economic crisis; the third is the political circumstances that led to the resignation of former PM Muhyiddin Yassin on 16 August 2021 and to the King's appointment of UMNO leader Ismail Sabri Yaakob as Malaysia's new prime minister. The second part of the article analyzes the attempts by the new government to address the health and the economic crises, and other key domestic and international policy issues, in the context of renewed calls for reforms ahead of the next national election.

2. *A political legitimacy issue*

Malaysia's key political developments in 2021 must be read against the backdrop of the previous year's circumstances. With a clientelistic logic continuing to underpin power battles in the political sphere and the pernicious effects of the perduring COVID-19-induced crisis affecting the lives and livelihoods especially of the middle and lower sections of society, the measures taken by the PN government to address the health, social and economic impact of the pandemic remained largely ineffective. In this situation, displays of a generalized discontent foreshadowed a political legitimacy crisis.

2. Hunter Murray, 'Malaysia in crisis: political instability and feelings of hopelessness', *The Round Table*, Vol. 110, No. 5, 2021, pp. 610-611.

3. Rebecca Ratcliffe, 'Malaysia's political turmoil: everything you need to know', *The Guardian*, 25 February 2020.

According to Bridget Welsh, in Malaysia, views and practices regarding political legitimacy rest on three intertwining pillars: 1) Malay traditional political institutions and the protection of the dominant political community; 2) economic governance and policy outputs; and 3) the constitutionally-bound democratic process.⁴ Moreover, with political power distributed in a personalistic and hierarchical way, legitimacy is predicated upon the way a leading politician manages to endorse and make use of the above-mentioned pillars. According to Welsh, governing politicians in Malaysia have largely relied on «traditional foundations» – i.e., protecting the position of the dominant political community – to legitimize their power. However, throughout 2021 «failures in governance and performance» and concerns about successive governments' democratic credentials contributed in shifting the public perception about the legitimacy of ruling coalitions. Matters of power distribution and institutional functioning as well as the government's performance on key policy areas gained centre-stage in the public debate.

2.1. *State of emergency*

At the beginning of the year, Malaysia was hit by a surge in COVID-19 cases, which followed the government's decision to remove restrictions to people's movement and gatherings during the holiday season.

Purportedly responding to the new wave of infections, the government managed to impose a nation-wide state of emergency on 12 January 2021. Appealing to article 150 of the Constitution, which details the conditions under which an emergency can be declared, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said that the measure was meant to enable his administration to tackle the «major threat to the economic life of the people of this country» posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ Unlike his first attempt to pass an emergency proclamation in October 2020, this time Muhyiddin received the backing of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (the constitutional king).

The move sanctioned the second declaration of emergency in the country's history (the first one was triggered by the 1969 race riots). As a consequence, the parliament and elections were suspended, and the government was granted special powers to introduce laws without parliamentary debate and voting. In addition, Muhyiddin's administration renewed the Movement of Control Order (MCO), which enforced strict limitations on people's movement outside their place of residence.⁶ The

4. Bridget Welsh, 'An evolving legitimacy crisis?' *Malaysiakini*, 20 June 2021.

5. 'Speech Text of The Special Announcement of Emergency', *Prime Minister's Office (PMO) of Malaysia*, 12 January 2021.

6. Azmil Tayeb & Por Heong Hong, 'Malaysia: Improvised Pandemic Policies and Democratic Regression', in Victor V. Ramraj (ed.), *COVID-19 in Asia. Law and Policy Contexts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 321-334.

imposition of the state of emergency provoked controversy for a number of interrelated reasons.

First, the suspension of all parliamentary activities allowed Muhyiddin to hold on to power despite having lost the parliamentary majority, after two government MPs had withdrawn their support. Defections from members of the UMNO had been looming since the voting on the 2021 budget in December 2020. In addition, relations within the ruling coalition had turned sour after a vote of no-confidence in the state of Perak had brought to power a UMNO-led coalition at the expense of Bersatu, Muhyiddin's political party. In a situation of minority government, the King's consent to a declaration of emergency allowed Muhyiddin to avoid a confidence vote over the viability of his coalition. The move sparked a debate over the King's constitutional role. Similar concerns had already been raised in 2020,⁷ when Muhyiddin's premiership had been validated by the Monarch without a previous parliamentary vote.

Second, Muhyiddin was accused of centring his political agenda on political calculations and neglecting the ongoing healthcare crisis as well as the social and economic consequences of the pandemic.⁸ In this context, the imposition of a state of emergency granting the government special legislative powers raised apprehensions about the country's democratic life. As noted by Dian AH Shah, in Malaysia's history, the previous emergency declaration was used to pass authoritarian laws, facilitate the government's abuse of power and suspend fundamental rights.⁹ In this case, critics contested the abrupt suspension of the parliamentary activities in a situation of minority government. Moreover, concerns were voiced about the long-term implications of the emergency for the functioning of Malaysia's already tenuous democratic processes,¹⁰ especially after a number of emergency regulations, including a «fake news» bill and the banning of public gatherings, had led to a clampdown on dissent.

The contentious imposition of the emergency ignited an increasing public disinclination towards the new COVID-19 containment measures. Social activists began to expose the double standards with which authorities were enforcing these regulations on ordinary citizens, compared to members of the elites and their close associates.¹¹ Notwithstanding the restrictions imposed under the MCO, in mid-2021, the mounting discontent

7. Azmil Tayeb, 'Malaysia in 2020 Fragile Coalitional Politics and Democratic Regression', p. 104.

8. Dian A. H. Shah, 'Malaysia's Game of Thrones amid a Pandemic: Constitutional Implications and Political Significance of the State of Emergency', *International Journal of Constitutional Law Blog*, 17 January, 2021.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Tommy Thomas, 'Emergency, democracy and rule of law – because it matters', *Aliran*, 3 July 2021.

11. 'Different strokes for different folks', *Malaysiakini*, 14 June 2021.

found expression in a wave of protests and collective actions, while journalists and social activists denounced the government's growing intolerance towards displays of public criticism.¹²

2.2. *On and offline public protests*

The protests channelled the boiling public anger at the government's handling of the pandemic-related crisis. Despite the fact that the state of emergency had facilitated the introduction of some measures designed to contain COVID-19 infections, the pandemic continued to wreak havoc. After a second wave in January 2021, a third wave driven by the Delta variant reached its peak in June 2021. On 1 June, with the country reporting 7,000 cases a day and the healthcare system on the verge of collapse, the government imposed a strict nation-wide lockdown. The economic downturn became increasingly evident, with companies shuttering and households losing their source of income amid rising prices.¹³ The scattered financial support provided through the government's National Recovery Plan (NRP) proved largely inadequate, as the prolonged disruption to economic activities and schooling continued to compromise the livelihoods of the middle and lower classes. Meanwhile, human rights groups and social activists criticized the punitive immigration and refugee policies of the Muhyiddin administration,¹⁴ warning also against their detrimental effects on the country's precarious healthcare situation. Forced into hiding for fear of deportation, undocumented migrants were increasingly at risk of contracting and spreading the virus. In addition, activists pointed out that the indiscriminate arrest of unvaccinated migrants would likely result in an upsurge of cases in detention centres.¹⁵ The Muhyiddin government responded to the criticism with intimidation and legal suits. For instance, in July 2021, authorities formally charged activist Heidy Quah under section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act for a June 2020 post criticizing the mistreatment of refugees at a detention centre.¹⁶

Amid worsening socio-economic conditions and ineffective governance responses, forms of collective solidarity and political activism started to

12. 'New PM needs new rights agenda', *Aliran*, 11 September 2021.

13. Sity Daud, 'The COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis in Malaysia and the Social Protection Program', *Journal of Developing Societies*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2021, pp. 491-492.

14. Contrary to a previous announcement made in February 2021, in May the government declared that the Immigration Department would locate and arrest undocumented migrants to "help" them get vaccinated and to "protect Malaysians." The Department then conducted a series of raids, and detained hundreds of migrant workers. 'Malaysia: Raids on Migrants Hinder Vaccine Access', *Human Rights Watch*, 30 June 2021.

15. *Ibid.*

16. 'Heidy Quah charged with making offensive Facebook post', *New Strait Times*, 27 July 2021.

emerge. The initiatives were mostly led by young urban activists, particularly active on social media, at a time when pandemic-related restrictions and the government's clampdown on free assembly had widely limited possibilities for collective action.¹⁷ The authorities' display of intolerance towards such forms of public mobilization, contributed to widen the political legitimacy deficit even further. For instance, during the month of June, a «white flag» (#benderaputih) campaign launched on the social media, spread across the country. Pieces of white cloth were hung at windows to signal distress and to request help from neighbours and the wider community. Muhyiddin dismissed the campaign as useless, applauding instead the outreach capacity of his own government's aid plan. «I think if we go to the ground we will probably find the kitchen of homes to be full» he was reported saying, adding that «there is no need to hang a white or black flag, but it's okay to hang a blue flag» (the PN coalition's colour).¹⁸ Muhyiddin was here making explicit reference the «black flag» (#benderahitam) campaign, a politically-charged movement, distinct from the white flag one, that demanded Muhyiddin's resignation over his government's handling of the pandemic. During the month of July the campaign picked up pace, as users across the country began to display a black flag on multiple social media platforms.

Then, on 26 July, as COVID-19 cases were still increasing, contract doctors held a nation-wide strike.¹⁹ Contract doctors in Malaysia are medical officers appointed for two years after completing their training and a two-year internship period. The pandemic exacerbated their already precarious working conditions, characterized by lack of job security, limited career progression, no social security provisions and low basic salaries. The strike called on the government to introduce reforms to improve their contractual arrangements. The action gained public attention, especially after reports emerged of police trying to prevent them from joining the strike, intimidating journalists who were covering the issue and launching investigations on participants for violating MCO regulations.²⁰

In the following days, two political developments inflamed the public debate even further. The first was the government's unilateral decision to lift the emergency, without previous consultation with the King. The move, which allowed Muhyiddin to avoid parliamentary debate over contentious emergency ordinances, was criticised by the opposition, who accused the PM of disrespecting the Monarch and disregarding the constitutionally-bound

17. 'In Malaysia, young people find their voice amid a pandemic', *Al Jazeera*, 28 September 2021.

18. 'Touting govt aid, Muhyiddin says no need to raise white or black flags', *Malaysiakini*, 15 July 2021.

19. Jazlan Jamaluddin *et al.*, 'Doctors Strike During COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia: Between Right and Wrong', *Voices in Bioethics*, Vol. 7, 2021.

20. 'Intimidation and threats a recurring theme in doctors' strike', *Malaysiakini*, 26 July 2021.

procedures. Then, under public pressure, the King allowed parliament to reconvene, for the first time in seven months, to discuss the NRP. However, after only three days, the government enforced a new suspension order due to a number of COVID-19 infections in the building. The fresh stop to parliamentary activities, coupled with the over-stretching of the rules for ending the emergency, fuelled criticism from the ranks of the opposition and reignited public anger fatigued by the political situation and the pandemic-induced restrictions. Under the banner of the new social media hashtag #Lawan (#protest), hundreds of young people in black outfits and holding anti-government placards marched towards the parliamentary building in Kuala Lumpur, invoking the resignation of the PN government.²¹ In addition to Muhyiddin's resignation, protesters called for Parliament to resume its regular activity and for the end of the emergency rule. The government responded by deploying a large contingent of security forces. Members of the Sekretariat Solidariti Rakyat, the youth group that had organized the rally and was behind the «black flag» campaign, were arrested or put under investigation under the infamous 1948 Sedition Act and for other offences related to the breaching of the infection-containment regulations.²²

On and offline forms of collective action, including solidarity movements and manifestations of contempt towards authorities, signalled a new development in public life. In particular, the perception of a political elite focused on securing their share of privileges and power fuelled new ways of expressing public discontent that bypassed political parties and their leaders and exposed a growing political legitimacy deficit. In particular, as Pauline Pooi Yin Leong and Amirul Adli Rosli have argued, the effectiveness of online campaigns in mobilizing people online and galvanizing support for offline protests had direct political outcomes contributing, in August 2021, to the fall of the Muhyiddin government amid tremendous political pressure.²³

2.3. *New change of government*

On 16 August 2021, Muhyiddin Yassin resigned, after only 17 months in power, making him the shortest-serving PM in the country's history. The move came in response to a new political crisis within the ruling coalition, with members of the UMNO withdrawing their support, citing the government's disregard for constitutional procedures.

As discussed above, the negative public perception over the political situation and the handling of a ravaging COVID-19 outbreak, contributed

21. '#LAWAN: A Recap of 31 July', *Amnesty International*, 3 August 2021.

22. 'Malaysia probes black flag movement for alleged seditious elements', *The Straits Times*, 6 July 2021.

23. Pauline Pooi Yin Leong & Adli Rosli Amirul, *Hashtag campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia: escalating from online to offline*, ISEAS Publishing, Singapore, 2021.

to the mounting dissatisfaction with the government and the political establishment. In this context, Muhyiddin's resignation was precipitated by the UMNO's machinations to restore its own dominance, by playing on its traditionally Malay-centred outlook. The crisis was the outcome of the flimsy political foundations on which the Muhyiddin government had been built. As argued by Kai Ostwald, the three major parties (Bersatu, UMNO, and – PAS) of the PN government «share the same Malay-Muslim core constituency but have no reliable internal mechanism to resolve disputes».²⁴ This configuration made the ruling coalition inherently prone to conflict and allowed the UMNO to emerge as alternative to the other two Malay-dominated parties. Despite a reputation as a corruption-ridden,²⁵ clientelistic and ethnicized political force, the party managed to finally reclaim the premiership lost in the 2018 election defeat. After a brief interim government, the King designated Ismail Sabri Yaakob from UMNO as Malaysia's ninth prime minister.²⁶

Among his first actions, the Prime Minister promoted a Confidence and Supply Agreement, meant to ensure the PH opposition's support in exchange for an agreed-upon reform package. The latter was inked in a *Memorandum of Understanding for Transformation and Political Stability* on 13 September.²⁷ The document listed a number of commitments including a reform of the judiciary, an anti-party-hopping law, a two-term limit for the PM position, the lowering the voting age to 18, automatic voter registration, and an agenda for economic recovery. Welcoming the agreement as a successful cross-party cooperation effort, Ismail declared: «the Keluarga Malaysia» [Malaysian family] spirit stresses unity, camaraderie and togetherness. This has manifested itself in the Memorandum of Understandings».²⁸

The Keluarga Malaysia narrative of inclusiveness and unity became a core feature of Ismail's discursive repertoire. In an effort to restore some

24. Kai Ostwald, 'Malaysia in 2021: Pandemic, Emergency, and Reprieve', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2022, pp. 83-92.

25. UMNO was linked to financial misconduct involving the state investment fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad, or 1MDB. Last year, former UMNO Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak was finally sentenced to a 12-year prison term for his responsibility in the corruption scandal.

26. According to Ooi Kok Hin, Ismail Sabri «was appointed to the premiership out of the force of circumstance». In fact, UMNO president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and UMNO deputy president Mohamad Hasan were both not eligible: the former was facing corruption charges while the latter was not a Member of Parliament. In this context, Sabri emerged as UMNO frontrunner and was sworn in as Prime Minister on 21 August 2021. Ooi Kok Hin, 'Peril or Opportunity? The Case of Malaysia's First Non-party Leader Prime Minister', *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 133, 12 October 2021.

27. 'Where to, now, Malaysia?', *Aliran*, 21 September 2021.

28. 'Malaysian govt, PH opposition sign historic bipartisan deal; polls not expected before Aug 2022', *The Strait Times*, 14 September 2021.

legitimacy to a political establishment discredited by the compound effects of political instability and ineffective governance he championed the pacification of the political and the social realms. However, the pledge to work across divisions and for the benefit of all clashed with Ismail's affiliation to a party – the UMNO – with a tradition of exploiting ethnic divisions for political gain.²⁹ Moreover, despite promises of political change, the new cabinet turned out to be a reshuffled version of the one that had just fallen out of the public's favour.³⁰ The PM's tenuous influence within a ruling coalition fraught with factionalism resulted in the appointment of only five new ministers and four new deputy ministers and the confirmation of 26 ministers and 34 deputy ministers from the previous government. The substantial continuity between the old and the new cabinets and the restoration of the UMNO rule made it clear that Ismail's government was unfit to address the structural problems that had fuelled public calls for a reformist agenda.

Both issues became highly relevant with regard to the public perception of the government's performance on three key policy concerns: the economic recovery, the handling of the pandemic, and the response to the devastating floods that ravaged the country in December 2021.

3. Policy issues and demands for political accountability

According to William Case, a political legitimacy deficit emerges when public distrust of the political establishment intersects with a perception of a government's poor performance in key policy areas.³¹ In his analysis of the 2008 political transition in Malaysia, which for the first time after independence threatened to shake the UMNO's dominance, Case has shown that in countries like Malaysia, where legitimacy rests on a highly ethnicized political culture and on single-party dominance, «the fragilities of legitimacy on the institutional plane must be offset by performance on the policy axis».³² In that sense, perceptions of a government's incompetence triggers a sharper scrutiny of previously taken-for-granted political practices and institutional functioning, which in turn fuels distrust of elected representatives. Legitimacy is then increasingly dependent upon greater checks on the performance of a government and its leaders, especially in the context of pledges to advance a reformist agenda. In a similar way, through 2021, growing criticism of the political elite and their seeming questionable abid-

29. Ooi Kok Hin, 'Peril or Opportunity? The Case of Malaysia's First Non-party Leader Prime Minister'.

30. Francis E. Hutchinson, 'Malaysia's New Cabinet: Same-Same, Minus the Buzz', *FULCRUM: Analysis on Southeast Asia*, 31 August 2021.

31. William Case, 'Political Legitimacy in Malaysia: Historical Roots and Contemporary Deficits', *Politics & Policy*, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 497-522.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 516.

ance to democratic norms and institutions was enhanced by perceptions that successive administrations were unable to deliver on much awaited reforms, to handle the pandemic, and to address urgent policy issues.

3.1. *The economic policy put to test by the pandemic*

Throughout 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to exacerbate Malaysia's economic downturn, the effects of which hit hard on the most vulnerable social groups. According to the Department of Statistics' *Household Income Estimates and Incidence Poverty Report*,³³ in 2020 over half a million middle-income households fell into the low-income group, with expenditure for food and healthcare eroding private citizens' finances. As mentioned above, the NRP implementation could only partially address the scale of the country's economic travails. In July 2021, the white flag campaign brought to light the extent to which the COVID-19 crisis had jeopardized the livelihoods of the middle and lower classes across ethnic lines. By August, a crushing fourth wave drove daily cases to around 22,000, the region's highest number per capita.³⁴ Demands for a government response that could address the structural issues amplified by the pandemic increasingly saturated the public debate. In these circumstances, Ismail's presentation of the 2022 budget and the 12th Malaysia Plan (12MP) under the umbrella of the *Keluarga Malaysia* (Malaysian Family) narrative came under close public scrutiny.³⁵

The year 2021 marked the 50th anniversary of Malaysia's New Economic Policy, which introduced the so-called *Bumiputera* agenda, an affirmative action policy designed to boost the upward mobility of the socio-economically disadvantaged Malaysian indigenous communities.³⁶ The *Bumiputeras* constitute an heterogeneous category, which include all ethnic Malays and other indigenous ethnic groups such as the *Orang Asli* in Peninsular Malaysia and the tribal people in Sabah and Sarawak. Together, they comprise 70% of the population. Over time, the *Bumiputera* policy became a key marker for the political legitimacy of governments and politicians.³⁷ The agenda became embedded in Malaysia's political economy, despite critical observers contending that its implementation had often ended up favouring a small wealthy Malay elite and entrenching socio-economic ine-

33. Department of Statistics Malaysia, *Household Income Estimates and Incidence of Poverty Report, Malaysia, 2020*, 6 August 2021.

34. 'Malaysia reports 22,948 coronavirus cases, new daily high', *Reuters*, 19 August 2021.

35. 'PM Ismail's First 100 Days: Beating Expectations Is Not Enough', *The Diplomat*, 9 December 2021.

36. Lee Hwok Aun. 'Fifty Years of Malaysia's New Economic Policy: Three Chapters with No Conclusion', *ISEAS Economics Working Paper*, No. 7, July 2021.

37. Lee Hwok Aun, 'Mapping Errors and Missed Opportunities in the Twelfth Malaysia Plan', *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 152, 18 November 2021.

qualities within and across ethnic lines.³⁸ Critics of Ismail's Keluarga Malaysia remarked that the 2022 budget allocations fell short of addressing such problems. Despite the passing of the largest spending bill in the country's history (roughly € 72 billion), the continuous treatment of the Bumiputera heterogenous category as a homogenous social group enhanced a public perception that the lower classes would be excluded from the economic recovery picture.³⁹

Ismail's Keluarga Malaysia rhetoric similarly clashed with his political discourse concerning 12MP, the policy document which identifies the country's development priority areas and outlines the five-year strategy for achieving them. In a parliamentary address on 27 September 2021, Ismail took ownership of the 12MP, which had actually been developed by the Muhyiddin administration, linking the traditional pro-Malay discourse to his Keluarga Malaysia narrative. Ismail insisted on the need to leave no-one behind and on the aspiration to «live happily together, as a family irrespective of income level, religion, race and ethnicity».⁴⁰ However, he also provided an inaccurate depiction of the Chinese-Bumiputera income disparities when he affirmed that «the median income gap between Bumiputera and Chinese is widening, quadrupling in 2019 compared with the gap in 1989».⁴¹ According to Lee Hwok Aun, however, proportionally the gap has narrowed with the median Bumiputera household income rising from 58% of that of Chinese households in 1989, to 73% by 2019.⁴²

This and other passages in his speech sparked doubts over his actual commitment to an inclusive economic policy. The foundations of Ismail's Keluarga Malaysia rhetoric were further put to test as the country confronted disastrous floods in December 2021.

3.2. *The political fallout of the December 2021 floods*

In December 2021, during the monsoon season, Malaysia was hit by devastating floods, due to particularly heavy torrential rain. The state of Selangor, the country's wealthiest and most populous state, was among the worst-affected areas. At least 54 people were reported dead and more than

38. C. Choong, 'Race-based affirmative action in Malaysia: Misrecognised subjectivities, enduring inequalities', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2021.

39. Lee Hwok Aun, 'Bumiputeras vs «the Others» in Malaysia's 2022 Budget: Moral Outrage is Not Enough', *Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia*, 18 November 2021.

40. 'Speech by Prime Minister Yang Amat Berhormat Dato' Sri Ismail Sabri Yaakob for the tabling of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan, 2021-2025', 27 September 2021. Available at: https://rmke12.epu.gov.my/storage/mediastatementandspeech/2021092820_official_translation_speech_of_yab_prime_minister_tabling_of_the_twelfth_malaysia_plan_2021_2025.pdf

41. *Ibid.*

42. Lee Hwok Aun, '12MP, PM's speech discrepancies on bumiputera policies raise eyebrows', *Malaysiakini*, 2 October 2021.

120,000 displaced, while livelihoods and businesses were irretrievably damaged.⁴³ As stranded residents sought shelter in relief centres, COVID-19 cases began to rapidly rise. The remarkably slow official response to the disaster triggered an outpouring of public anger towards the Ismail administration.⁴⁴ Politicians were criticized for continuing their holiday while harrowing images of flood-affected regions circulated on all news channels. Ismail finally admitted to certain «weaknesses» in the government's relief efforts. However, he still managed to bypass parliamentary scrutiny, as Azhar Azizan Harun, Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat (the Parliament lower house), was accused of denying to opposition MPs the space for a discussion of flood-related events.⁴⁵

Much like during the height of the COVID-19 crises, social media became a magnifying tool for both people's frustration at the lack of official aid and the requests for help from the flood victims.⁴⁶ As a result, people began to organize and reach out to the affected regions with food and basic necessities. Meanwhile, Twitter feeds filled up with comments blaming the disastrous government performance and the clientelistic practices through which key government positions had been distributed to politicians considered incompetent.⁴⁷ In this context, the new hashtag «#DoNotDonate-Here» trended on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. The campaign discouraged people from donating to relief funds organized by the government and proposed to redirect the money to non-governmental organizations. The action, which channelled anti-government sentiments by promoting grass-roots relief initiatives, is quite representative of how governance issues in Malaysia have fuelled forms of collective mobilization that have in turn enhanced public criticism of both politicians and the (dys)functioning of institutional norms.

4. *International outlook and regional dynamics*

In November 2021, the government launched a National Action Plan on Forced Labour (NAPFL) aimed at implementing the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Forced Labour Convention. The launch of the NAPFL followed a two-year project undertaken by the Ministry of Human Resources

43. 'Malaysia floods caused nearly \$1.5 billion in losses, government report says', *Reuters*, 28 January 2022.

44. 'Frustration Grows in Malaysia Over Government's Slow Flood Response', *The Diplomat*, 24 December 2021.

45. 'Speaker erred in dismissing demands to debate flood issue', *Malaysiakini*, 23 December 2021.

46. 'Malaysia Premier Faces Twitter Backlash Over Flood Response', *Bloomberg*, 24 December 2021.

47. *Ibid.*

and the ILO aimed at addressing Malaysia's longstanding issue of forced labour.⁴⁸ Yet, reports of continuing mistreatment of migrant workers impacted negatively on Malaysia's international reputation. Migrant labourers drive the Malaysian export-reliant economy, especially in the palm oil and the technological manufacturing sectors. Circulating evidence of workplace abuse and dismal living conditions for workers, who come mainly from Indonesia, Bangladesh and Nepal, led some international companies to withhold their association with their Malaysian partners, shaking the country's position in the global supply chain. For instance, British high-tech home appliance manufacturer Dyson Ltd withdrew its contract with its Malaysian supplier ATA IMS Bhd, citing labour abuse claims of migrant workers.⁴⁹ In December 2021, Human Resources Minister M. Saravanan recognized that «forced labour issues linked to local companies in the electronic and rubber gloves manufacturing sector, and palm oil plantations have projected a negative image to the country and this has affected foreign investors' confidence towards Malaysia's supply of products».⁵⁰ All this added to PM Ismail's dubious reputation over his migration policies, especially during his tenure as the Security and Defence Minister in the Muhyiddin cabinet.⁵¹

Also in November, Malaysia signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The agreement, reached after eight years of negotiations, created the world largest free trade area, including the ten ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member states and China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. The RCEP aims to enhance regional trade relations and to further develop regional value chains. Since, taken together, RCEP members make up nearly 60% of Malaysia's trade, the agreement was hailed as a potentially relevant component of the country's economic recovery.⁵²

Finally, on 7 December, the government launched Malaysia's new foreign policy framework.⁵³ On that occasion, Ismail announced that the coun-

48. 'Malaysia takes major step towards ending forced labour', *International Labour Organization*, 26 November 2021.

49. 'Dyson splits with Malaysia supplier, stoking concern over migrant worker treatment', *Reuters*, 6 December 2021.

50. 'Analysis: Malaysia's labour abuse allegations a risk to export growth model', *Reuters*, 22 December 2021.

51. In July 2020, two Al Jazeera journalists from Australia were investigated for shooting a documentary about the treatment of migrant workers and refugees amid the COVID-19 lockdown in Malaysia.

52. Ministry of International Trade and Industry, *Press Statement. The signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement*.

53. Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, *Launching Ceremony Of The "Focus In Continuity: A Framework For Malaysia's Foreign Policy In A Post-Pandemic World"*, 7 December 2021.

try would maintain an approach that is «principled and pragmatic».⁵⁴ His pledge to preserve Malaysia's respected and respectable international outlook reiterated a recurring theme in the country's foreign policy, which observers have recognized as a tool of internal leadership's legitimization.⁵⁵ So, in the context of a precarious security situation in the South China Sea and of Malaysia's reciprocal relations with both China and the United States, both the Muhyiddin and the Ismail governments remained committed to the country's traditionally neutral profile in international affairs. For example, when in June 2021 sixteen Chinese jets trespassed into Malaysian airspace, the government's response was confined to a statement of Minister of Foreign Affairs Hishammuddin Hussein: «Malaysia's stand is clear – having friendly diplomatic relations with any countries does not mean that we will compromise our national security».⁵⁶ At the same time, despite their overlapping claims in the South China Sea (which also involve the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, and Taiwan), leaders from both countries relied on a history of non-confrontational bilateral relations in order to pursue shared interests, such as those within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In April 2021, Muhyiddin's government contracted the Malaysian unit of the China Communications Construction Co Ltd to build the BRI East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), accepting an increase of nearly 14% in the construction cost. Moreover, through the year, Malaysia continued to accept China's vaccine support, as part of a diversified national vaccination scheme that picked up pace in the second half of 2021.⁵⁷ In fact, the realization of an almost-comprehensive immunization programme by November 2021, with 95,4% of the adult population fully vaccinated, was applauded by an otherwise increasingly trenchant public opinion as an effective and efficient pandemic-containment government effort.

5. Conclusion

In 2021, Malaysia witnessed the worsening of a political legitimacy crisis, propelled by poor government performance in key policy areas, in conjunction with growing public criticism of the pervasive political cronyism and its impact on the democratic process and the functioning of state institutions. The coalition government ushered in through backdoor arrangements and

54. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, *Malaysia's Foreign Policy* (<https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/foreign-policy>).

55. Sharifah Munirah Alatas, 'A Malaysian Perspective on Foreign Policy and Geopolitics: Rethinking West-Centric International Relations Theory', *Global Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 1, 2021, pp. 1-11.

56. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs will issue a diplomatic protest and summon the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China*, 1 June 2021.

57. Peter T. C. Chang, 'China's Vaccine Diplomacy in Malaysia: Problems and Prospects', *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 121, 15 September 2021.

defections in February 2020 turned out to be too divided and fragile to face the challenges brought about by the perduring impact of the pandemic. In the midst of a worsening healthcare situation, demands for better governance and greater political stability were once again frustrated. In August, the fresh change in government precipitated by the usual politicking between rival parties failed to quell demands for political transformation. However, despite concerns over a democratic regression voiced by observers in 2020, the following year was also marked by new forms of civic activism. The mounting public discontent put government's policies under closer public scrutiny. Powerful collective actions emerged out of the pandemic-induced socio-economic crisis, and were championed by educated urban youth. Young activists mobilized over a number of pressing matters — from refugee rights to healthcare policies and environmental causes — without however expressing a homogenous, distinct political affiliation. They used social media to organize and galvanize support for their actions. The lowering of the voting age empowered them with a new tool for channelling their demands for political change. Yet, given the political elite's inclination to bypass both elections and the Parliament that emerged from the vicissitudes of the past two-years, questions remain over when Malaysians will be given the opportunity to provide an electoral mandate for a new government.

