

Upbeat Hari Raya mood in Malaysia belies simmering tensions

Notwithstanding the positive Hari Raya atmosphere as benefits from the recent budget trickle down, this may be the calm before a possible political storm at the ballot box.

Serina Rahman

Recent announcements of a new Covid-19 wave spreading across Asia have resulted in some concerns expressed by health officials in the media.

The number of infections in Malaysia has been on the rise. The Ministry of Health's latest announcement indicated a 26.2 per cent increase in hospital admissions over the past week alone, consisting mainly of older patients or those with comorbidities. A number of clusters in schools have been reported over the past month.

Yet this has not dented the enthusiasm for the upcoming Hari Raya Aidilfitri celebrations.

Covid-19 seems to have been relegated to the status of an ordinary flu, as Malaysians want to leave the pandemic behind and are eagerly looking forward to better days. Outside Kuala Lumpur, few wear masks, unless they work in a food and beverage establishment or retail shop

where these are required.

Part of the indifference to the infection surge may be attributed to the cessation of daily reporting on infection numbers by the Health Ministry. Even its most recent public health advisories concerned heatwaves and hazy conditions that are deemed more hazardous.

The reality is that in parts of the country, especially in the rural north and north-eastern states of peninsular Malaysia, Covid-19 was never really taken seriously. Many Malaysians there refused to be vaccinated, as they firmly believe that the shot was far more dangerous than the virus.

Distrust of the Malaysian government also underpinned vaccine hesitancy. In my recent visit to Kedah, several repeated conspiracy theories suggesting that former minister of health Khairy Jamaluddin's son was injected with air instead of the Covid-19 vaccine, despite Mr Khairy's clarification in 2022.

They also claim that Mr Khairy's own vaccination card was dated from well before the vaccines were released.

Unhappiness over Malaysia's approach to restrict movement and access to amenities for the non-vaccinated at the peak of the pandemic continues to rankle, even though these rules were relaxed in May 2022.

Those I spoke to held former prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin culpable for the way they were treated during the pandemic. They thought it was grossly unfair that they were unable to dine out, enter shopping malls or get jobs simply because they were not vaccinated.



Outside Kuala Lumpur, few wear masks, unless they work in a food and beverage establishment or retail shop where these are required. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

The individuals I interviewed bristled at the thought of political leaders forcing them to take what they said was a "dangerous, fake cure". They claimed to have known many who died as a result of the jabs, and would not accept that there could have been other causes of death.

COVID-19 WILL NOT THWART THIS YEAR'S HARI RAYA CELEBRATIONS

For the first time since the pandemic, Malaysia seems ready to celebrate Hari Raya with a vengeance.

With the sale of fireworks and firecrackers made legal since April, the sky above many places has lit up with sporadic bursts of early celebrations.

The positive national mood is generating more dollars and cents. A survey of 1,000 small and medium-sized businesses in the first quarter of 2023 by credit agencies RAM Holdings and CTOS reported improved

business sentiment, in some part due to the recent expansionary budget announcement.

This positive outlook was boosted by the large number of visiting Singaporeans and Malaysians returning through Johor Bahru for the Qing Ming and Easter weekends.

With Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's unity government settled in, there seems to be some political calm and cautious optimism. Interviews with rural communities in Kedah and Johor suggest most are relatively satisfied with the political situation, but want the cost of living reduced.

Though core inflation slowed to 3.8 per cent in March, prices of most basic household goods remain largely unchanged. However, this has not shaken the festive Hari Raya mood. The eagerness to celebrate is palpable, with highways to the northern and eastern states logging heavy traffic since Tuesday.

LOOKING BEYOND HARI RAYA TO STATE POLLS

However, this might just be the calm before a storm. While the general sentiment is positive in the build-up to Hari Raya, there continues to be an undercurrent of political nervousness.

There are still viral social media posts predicting a fall of the current government, with some expecting this to happen as soon as June, depending on how a petition to the King to release former prime minister Najib Razak pans out.

The Hari Raya holidays are a great opportunity for politicians and parties to dish out goodies, conduct open homes and engage with their constituents.

Malaysia's budget plans for more progressive taxes aimed at higher-income folk, retirement fund top-ups and direct cash payments to poor families. And Datuk Seri Anwar has reassured that a return of the goods and services tax is not on the cards.

With the promised disbursements made during this Hari Raya season, and information widely available to help people to access aid, the cash assistance has translated into public acceptance and approval of the unity government.

Mr Anwar's unveiling of Hari Raya goodies includes discounts on basic food items like chicken and onions for shops selling Menu Rahmah meals – part of his early effort to encourage food outlets to offer nutritional, balanced food for less than RM5 (S\$1.50). The lifting of highway tolls this week has also contributed to the jubilant

atmosphere.

Mr Anwar's international forays to eight countries over 80 days is part of his government's plan to improve the economy through increased foreign investment. Media coverage of the RMI70 billion investment promises made in China was a signal to his electorate that he is doing what needs to be done to alleviate their burdens.

It did not go unnoticed that the Muslims in his entourage to China donned the *songkok* (the Malay-Muslim traditional headgear). His visit to and breaking of fast with the Hainan Muslim community were widely circulated on social media.

These are the subtle narratives that demonstrate Mr Anwar's commitment to Islam and his own Islamic credentials.

The political war drums are quietly beating in the background, and there is rarely an action undertaken that is not a deliberate piece of a larger narrative as preparations for the state elections get under way.

Political parties have begun to announce their Hari Raya open house dates and the grassroots machinery is moving to create opportunities for their leaders to engage with potential voters. An effective grassroots machinery and outreach strategy will be key to winning the state elections, increasingly seen as a referendum on Mr Anwar's government.

Many are waiting to see how the big guns make their rounds to determine whether they show genuine concern for the regular citizen. After the festive euphoria fades, bread-and-butter issues will return to the national agenda.

Malaysia is projected to grow by 4 per cent to 5 per cent in 2023, but these macro numbers mean little if the benefits are not felt by ordinary Malaysians.

What the government does next will make all the difference – Covid-19, the heatwave and haze will not.

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