

EDITORIAL

## Life After Covid19: The New Normal

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“If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place”, reported by Sahih Al-Bukhari. This was the phrase quoted by Prophet Muhammad 14 centuries ago concerning both in disease spread and prevention. The relevancy of this statement is now widely seen and surge by the social media in a hashtag of “stay home” on an international level due to pandemic of COVID-19 disease.

The Year 2020 is supposed to be a turning point for Malaysia as she was promised to become a developed nation by then. However, the dream turned to a nightmare with many unprecedented changes in the political scenario and the major health challenge facing the outbreak of virus COVID-19 disease, the official name as announced on 11th February 2020, which stands for the coronavirus disease that was discovered in 2019.

Malaysia recorded the first confirmed cases on January 25, 2020. These were visitors from Guangdong and Wuhan in China, which most experts agree was the source of the original outbreak. It was only two days before, on 23rd January 2020, Wuhan had been placed into full lockdown of her population and following the government’s acknowledgement of life-threatening epidemic.

By 28th February, Malaysia had 25 cases of COVID-19 infection, with two reported being foreigners who had respectively visited Japan, Indonesia, and Italy. As of 16th March, there were already 125 new COVID-19 cases, raising the tally of infections in the country to 553.

On 11th March 2020, The World Health Organization (WHO) has officially declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic, after the disease caused by the new coronavirus spread to more than 100 countries and led to tens of thousands of cases within a few months.

With this first outbreak, the government quickly implement the national lockdown, known as the Movement Control Order. The first phase of Movement Control Order (MCO-1) was imposed by Malaysia under the Control of the Spread of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967, effective from 18th to 31st March.

Under this order, all places of learning, from kindergartens to higher institutes and vocational schools were directed to be closed for the duration of the MCO, with higher education institutes transitioning to online lectures. All mass gatherings in the country, including religious, sporting, social, and cultural events, were directed to be postponed or cancelled. All places of worship, and businesses excluding essential services, were closed as well. Only essential services were allowed to operate such as medical, security, postal, electricity, and other essential services for the community (with strict Standard Operation Procedure – SOP).

The first phase of MCO was a means through which the government established a form of mitigation, of “flattening the epidemic curve”, which was basically to lower the spike in infected numbers that would overwhelm the healthcare system. Aimed at breaking the COVID-19 chain of infection.

The MCO-1 which was original to have expired on 31st March 2020, was extended further two weeks until 14th April 2020 (MCO-2) after COVID-19 cases kept on rising.

The focus of this MCO-2 was to break the chain of transmission by focusing on target groups identified as the source of the spread of the disease. This had resulted in positive cases being brought under control at 7 per cent, which is below the benchmark of 7 per cent set by WHO. The fatality rate recorded was also low, at 1.6 per cent compared to 5.8 per cent at the global level. The recovery rate at 43 per cent (1,830 cases) was encouraging and was more than the number of new positive cases. The number of new positive cases had also shown to decline.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) has described the implementation of the MCO-1 and MCO-2 following the COVID-19 outbreak as successful in producing positive results. However, based on advice from MOH and medical experts, the government had decided to extend the MCO. This was to step up checks along the country’s borders to prevent illegal immigrants from slipping in through “rat routes” and bringing the virus into the country. The MCO-3 was extended for another two weeks, from 15th to 28th April. This action was in line with the view of WHO, which suggested that countries should not end the Movement Control Order too early, and has happened in several countries, the spread of the disease increased again when the order was lifted.

During MCO-3, certain areas (red spot areas) which recorded higher local transmission implementation of the “enhanced MCO” (MCO-E) were implemented. This had encouraging outcome as it achieved the goals of ramped-up case-detection and limiting the local transmission set out for the two weeks.

At this time of writing, Malaysia is already extended the MCO to MCO-4 with effect from 29th April to 12th May 2020.

The war on COVID-19 is not over yet and we have not won the war yet, neither have we lost the war. We are still in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. The extension of the MCO is necessary to prevent a potential immediate second wave.

The most uttered question now is when will this be over and when we can only return to our old way? Can life return to normal after the MCO ends?

These can only happen if the virus dies out due to effective lockdowns all over the world or tones down to become like seasonal influenza. We can only be "safe" if we managed to find a "miracle cure" that can treat large numbers of people and reduce the severity of the disease. We hope the development of a highly effective vaccine that can be mass-produced and distributed to large volumes of the population to give us immunity. However, all these prospects are highly unlikely to happen soon. Thus, there is no immediate return to the old ways.

We would be living in a new reality – 'post-corona virus reality' and we have to learn how we need to change, how we can adapt and survive this reality. This will be our "new normal" way of life. It could be a blessing in disguise – a pause in our busy lives to stop and experience this family bonding. We can start appreciating the things we have and spend quality time with the ones that matter most to us.

A reminder to all of us that the little things we took for granted. We do not appreciate what we have until it is gone – "Freedom is like air when you have it, you do not notice it". The truth is, we do not know definite answers too many questions. What we can do in the meantime is reflect on what we do know. And as the great physicist Richard Feynman said, "What is not surrounded by uncertainty cannot be the truth".

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we live.

May Allah bless us all.

