REVISITING COVID-19 IN MALAYSIA

Plight and Perseverance

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Vilashini Somiah is an anthropologist and senior lecturer at the Gender Studies Programme at Universiti Malaya. She maintains a keen interest in underrepresented narratives of women, migrants and Borneans living in the interiors. She co-edited *Sabah From the Ground: The 2020 Elections and the Politics of Survival* (SIRD/ISEAS, 2021) and authored *Irregular*

Migrants and the Sea at the Borders of Sabah, Malaysia: Pelagic Alliance (Palgrave MacMillan, 2022), which has won a national award.

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Rebuilding the Human Spirit

Firstly, I would like to thank Dr Vilashini Somiah and Dr Nur Dayana Ariffin for inviting me to write a foreword to this book.

This project is one of the early initiatives by colleagues from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Universiti Malaya and their collaborators to address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia and the region, from the perspective of social sciences and humanities. As the editors have pointed out, existing literature has been focusing on finding solutions to the pandemic, especially from the medical or health-related perspectives. There is a dire need to examine the impact of the pandemic on the social economic dimension. We need to understand how the pandemic has impacted and transformed the society and the nation. It is hoped that the book will help provide analysis of issues, ranging from social and economic issues to political or religious matters, so that there is a deeper understanding of the impact of the pandemic on Malaysia.

From the moment the virus was identified and classified as a pandemic, and an emergency was declared, issues and problems came to the fore. Naturally, there were some inadequacies in the system of structure of society in coping with the emergency. As the pandemic unfolded, its effect on countries across the globe led to many businesses being shut down while people lost their jobs and struggled with less income. Despite

the efforts of the government in providing assistance and aid, it was still challenging for many to have their needs met.

As the book shows us, the disruption caused by the pandemic was felt extensively in the education sector. Due to the closure of schools as a means to prevent the spread of the pandemic, alternative ways of delivering lessons were sought. Online education, deemed to be the next best option, was introduced. While it helped to keep education going, it also brought the digital divide to the fore. This was not confined to the urban-rural divide, but brought to the fore the challenges in the cities where a sizable urban poor exists. Many could not afford the network and devices for online lessons to be conducted. Throughout this period of pandemic, the nation went through a series of changes of national leaders, and elections were called in at least four states, further adding risks of escalation to the pandemic.

The book explores in detail, the psychological effect and mental health caused by the pandemic on Malaysian society. This was not confined to the B40 (bottom 40 percent of income earners) but the entire spectrum of the Malaysian population. The lockdown that led to everyone staying at home over a protracted period, also posed challenges to both individuals and families. Anxiety and uncertainty stepped in. This was further compounded by other issues including job security and financial considerations.

While the pandemic has brought enormous challenges to everyone, it also brought about the best in human spirit, especially the fortitude to overcome crises brought about by the pandemic and the spirit of empathy for fellow Malaysians. The tireless and commendable efforts by those in the frontline services and the orderly manner of Malaysians in getting themselves vaccinated are some of the great triumphs over these challenges. The community-based initiatives including operating foodbanks, all voluntarily, further enhanced the sense of social cohesion and togetherness as one people.

I would like to commend Vilashini and Nur Dayana for putting together an admirable team of colleagues from many spectrums of lives to contribute to this volume. I have no doubt that we will be able to learn a great deal from their contributions.

Datuk Prof. Danny Wong Tze Ken
Dean
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Universiti Malaya

Recovering from the Covid-19 Tsunami

I am delighted and honoured to be invited to offer a foreword to this relevant and timely book on the many and diverse challenges faced during this Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 could easily be viewed as the 'plague' of our times. As with previous plagues, it unmasked the social fabric and support services of all nations, and highlighted the gaps in the provision of such services and safety nets. In Malaysia, Covid-19 had unmasked and exacerbated the existing inequalities in our society, especially in health, education and employment. For everyone, but especially those living in poverty or who struggled economically, the pandemic caused significant and adverse impacts. It had stretched the resources of all civil society support organisations, while exposing the failures in our national systems in supporting the most marginalised among us.

In this pandemic, people spoke about being in the 'same boat' but it was not true. We have all weathered the storm in very different ways. People who suffered the most were those living in absolute or relative poverty, the disabled, rural communities especially those in Sabah and Sarawak, indigenous communities and those who were stateless, refugees or in detention centres. The impact on the rich and those in power was considerably less.

Covid-19 was also a benchmark to measure the quality of critical civil services and the leadership of nations. Sadly, we discovered that limited investment in our national health services over many decades, coupled with shortfalls in the public health sector, had impaired our ability to respond adequately to the pandemic. Our welfare service has always been grossly inadequate and understaffed and during the pandemic, the allocation of emergency resources by the government failed to adequately reach all those in need. National leadership has also been found wanting, with continual double standards practised by those in government and power, with a failure of leadership by example.

Covid-19 could be dubbed, the Great Distractor. It distracted us from the many pressing issues in the nation of social and political reform, and prolonged the decline and decay of our nation.

Interestingly, while the policies, machinery and delivery of the administration were limited, the Covid-19 pandemic brought out some of the best in Malaysians and in our civil society organisation (CSOs). Individuals and CSOs reached out to those that 'fell between the cracks'. The outpouring of support for Malaysians in this crisis, via initiatives like '#kitajagakita', the 'White Flag Movement' and other grassroot initiatives, demonstrated the hope that still exists in our nation.

The Covid-19 pandemic 'marathon' may not be over. Even with effective vaccines, it is possible that there may be new variants of concern for another 1-2 years. The spectre of Long Covid continues to become more apparent, even in the vaccinated, and this pandemic may well become the greatest mass disabling event in human history.

Importantly, there will be a prolonged post pandemic recovery for many years. Lives have been lost and many families are still in grief. Jobs and businesses have to be built back. Our children are facing an enormous education crisis. We have a huge mental health pandemic, with increased anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders and suicides to deal with. Our children are becoming a 'fearful generation' and we will only come to realise how this will materialise as we witness the full impact of this prolonged pandemic has on our children. As the years go by, it is likely we will have to help them cope with psychological morbidity, demographic change, limited educational outcomes and manpower crises, all issues of concern for many generations to come.

As we plan a continued recovery, we must focus on equity and building back better. We must not return to our failed systems of the past.

Hence, we need to aspire to embrace a 'new normal', a new way of living with our fellow man, the earth and all its other non-human inhabitants. We have built a false society for ourselves but must break free from the shackles of this, and return to a world where everyone is respected, where the earth is valued and cared for, and one where we strive for truth and reality and not advertised illusions. Change is never easy, as the rich and powerful continue to obstruct our reality. But change is always possible and begins with each and every one of us.

If we do not embrace the 'opportunity' this virus inadvertently has given us to change for the better, then we will return to our stupor of a previous 'psychosis'. More than ever, we must work towards a common good of all. Let us as a people, as a society, move towards a greater, more equitable sharing of resources, as well as exercising more altruism, self-restraint and compassion.

This book comes at an opportune time. The authors and contributors explore many aspects of the impact of the pandemic on different communities as well as the response of different segments of our society. Some areas explored covered are those that have received insufficient attention namely the arts, xenophobia against refugees, the lost generation of children and effective health communication. Covid-19 is a wake-up call for our society and nation. This book is a valuable resource to widen and intensify the dialogue that is necessary as we plan for the future. As Malaysians, we must stop thinking in narrow self-focused terms. This book offers us an opportunity to view Malaysia from a better perspective and with generous hearts.

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Preface

By mid 2022, a looming sense of dread fell over many of us in Malaysia. The number of Covid-19 positive cases began to spike again, for the fourth time. The government began encouraging Malaysians and residents to consider taking their 4th vaccine shot, specifically targeting seniors and those with comorbidities, although it was apparent that pandemic fatigue has set in heavily. With the local media aware of the dangers of complacency, as well as the significance of diplomatic and business ties with countries with zero-Covid recovery strategies, it is easy to understand why Malaysian residents now regard the pandemic with indifference.

The government, being cognisant of the dangers that come with enforcing a complete lockdown, have promised to only introduce stricter standard operating procedures for future Covid-19 positive spikes. But with local economies still reeling from previous movement control orders and impacted also by external factors such as the Russian-Ukraine War and climate change,, those in Malaysia continue to revisit previous pandemic related traumas both collectively and individually.

This book began as a conversation between the two of us in 2020; with the pandemic having quickly become a medical crisis of epic proportions both worldwide and in Malaysia. *"How is life experienced by all of us?"*, we wondered. We knew, while we had struggled with many aspects of living with the virus in the "new normal", much could be managed

from our privileged places in the ivory tower of academia. And so, this conversation led us to ask a series of other important questions: "*how will the virus impact the lived realities of everyday Malaysians?", "In what ways are they nuanced?" "What other issues and concerns will emerge out of our experience of Covid-19?"* More importantly - "*Who will be overlooked on our road to recovery?" , "Why will they be overlooked?", and "How can we ever find solutions to their plight?*"

Given the scientific and medical nature of the literature produced on Covid-19, we wanted to see if social science and humanities scholars could use Malaysia as a microcosm to attempt to answer some of these concerns, which continue to be global even until today. And so, friends and colleagues in Malaysian academia came together to put pen to paper and bring this book to life. This is ultimately a project that we have collectively learned so much from about the "new world" we now occupy.

We begin by sharing our sincerest thanks to Dean, Professor Danny Wong Tze Ken as well as the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya for supporting this project through the Private Funding Grant (Grant Number GPF037-2020) for the year 2020. This grant helped provide funding to attempt the book project and deliver a polished final product. In being able to do this, we also offer our gratitude for the friendship, patience and proficiency of our amazing editor, Charles Brophy, who despite his hectic schedule, agreed to come on board to help us elevate the quality of each chapter in ways we would not have been able to.

On behalf of all our contributors, we also wish to thank all the communities of researchers represented in each of our chapters. Their graciousness in allowing us insight and access to their lived realities has helped researchers like us understand their plight and persistence of different communities in Malaysia in surviving the pandemic. In a similar vein, we want to take this opportunity to remember and give our thoughts to everyone impacted by Covid-19, both in Malaysia and around the world. As we write this, almost 6.5 million people worldwide have died from the virus, and hundreds of millions more became ill, disabled, displaced, unemployed, and disenfranchised by it. While it is expected that these numbers will continue to grow in our lifetime, we must do all we can to help to limit its progression, through different forms of education and awareness.

As academicians, we are privileged to have the opportunity to engage with discourses that can be of use to society in one way or another. We must continue to recall to ourselves in the midst of our multiple attempts to recover as a nation. May this be one of many more academic projects in Malaysia and worldwide that continue to do that, and may we together, find new ways to make life far better for those who continue to struggle.

Vila and Dayana

Covid-19 and the 'Sarawak Way'

surviving the pandemic?

Collin Jerome

Covid-19 had dominated the global agenda since its emergence in Wuhan, China in late 2019. The deadly virus had spread around the globe generating an unprecedented number of cases and deaths. It affected virtually all aspects of life, from people's health and well-being to education, politics, the economy, and society.[1] Alongside this has been the development of Covid-19 related knowledge, attitudes, and practices among the general populace.[2] These knowledge, attitudes, and practices – which are influenced by a host of factors including health communication and social mobilisation efforts – played a major role in protecting public health and managing the spread of disease.[3] Recent studies have examined this aspect, with major findings showing people's differing views about their knowledge, attitudes and practices towards Covid-19.

A study by Al-Hanawi et al. showed that a majority of the survey participants from Saudi Arabia were not only knowledgeable about Covid-19 but also displayed optimistic attitudes and good practices towards it.[4] Female participants were found to be more knowledgeable and optimistic, and adhered to good practices with regard to the disease, while

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[1]   OECD, 2020
[2]   Saadatjoo et al. 2021.
[3]   Nicastri, et al., 2021
[4]   Al-Hanawi et al., 2020.

older adults were also likely to possess better knowledge and practices.[5] These findings, however, were in contrast to those reported by Azlan et al. who examined the same phenomenon in Malaysia.[6] Although a majority of the survey participants namely those above the age of 50, held sufficient knowledge about Covid-19, those with low monthly income exhibited only a moderate understanding of it.[7] The varied levels of public knowledge in the Malaysian context was attributed to a plenitude of factors including people's higher risk perception of contraction and complication from Covid-19, as well as their limited access to credible and timely information about the disease.[8] The study also showed that most participants held positive attitudes about overcoming Covid-19, particularly in terms of the government's success in controlling the disease, and that they adhered to good preventive practices such as avoiding crowds and practicing proper hygiene.[9]

While these studies highlighted the significant role of governments in times of a health crisis, this role is far more complex than often thought. This is because questions such as "Who to trust?" and "How is information received?", as Lundgren and McMakin contend, are key to understanding people's stances, actions and understandings related to public health emergency preparedness and response.[10] Lundgren and McMakin maintain that in such situations, some populations may have a distrust or fear of the government and health institutions of their respective countries, and may be more likely to trust local officials and agencies than federal ones during a public health crisis.[11] To complicate matters, people's lives and livelihoods during the disease outbreak, as Horton argues, were virtually at the mercy of the governments of their respective countries.[12]

Horton criticised the failure of major Western nations such as US, UK, France and Italy in preparing for the outbreak, leading to catastrophic mortality rates despite having the best scientists and most

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[5]   Ibid.
[6]   Arina et al, 2020,
[7]   Ibid.
[8]   Ibid.
[9]   Ibid.
[10]   Lundgren and McMakin,2018.
[11]   Ibid.
[12]   Horton, 2020, 84.

advanced medical technologies.[13] Rather than admitting their mistakes and shortcomings, these nations played a finger-pointing game and spread further disinformation, which resulted in more confusion among the general populace.[14] Horton is not alone in his opinion and observation. Brown, Brechenmacher, and Carothers discussed the political effects of the pandemic on democracy and governance across the world.[15] These effects, among others, include: the government's weakening of checks and balances, and its erosion of accountability, the local-national disconnect due to the frictions between national and local government officials in pandemic response, and grassroots/non-state actors' heightened roles in pandemic response, as evidenced by the wave of anti-government protests.[16]

This shows us that people's knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards Covid-19 were not only influenced by their age, gender, monthly income, or their access to information about the disease. Government at all levels also played an important role in shaping people's understanding, stances, and actions regarding the disease, which should form an integral part of the planning and execution of crisis response and recovery plans. The divide or disconnect between levels of government in responding to the pandemic posed an obstacle to those plans and this requires further discussion, as it can highlight a series of issues such as:

1) the experiences of dealing with Covid-19 among individuals and communities living in specific contexts or settings, whose stories were often unheard or discussed in mainstream discourse about the disease;

2) how these experiences were affected by different approaches taken by the federal and state governments to protect public health and manage the spread of disease during the pandemic; and

3) the impacts these approaches had on people's knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards Covid-19 and their sense of identity in the context of a public health crisis.

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[13]   Kow, 2020, 208.
[14]   Brown et al. 2020.
[15]   Ibid.
[16]   Ibid.

These issues can be explored and discussed within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic that has affected the people of the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. Firstly, Sarawakians' lived experiences and voices have long been and often continue to be marginalised in public discourse on the basis that they are ethnically, diverse and geographically distinct from their counterparts in West Malaysia. Secondly, because these characteristics of marginality were more obvious during the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of tenuous and ambivalent federal-state relations, exacerbated by the federal and state government's respective approaches to handling the fatal disease.

Covid-19 and the People of Sarawak

Sarawak, like other states in Malaysia, were heavily affected by the current wave of Covid-19 infections. As of August 2021, there were 101,381 confirmed positive cases and 508 death cases caused by the disease.[17] According to the Sarawak Disaster Management Committee (SDMC), the state recorded its first Covid-19 cases on 13 March 2020 after the return of two attendees of the mass religious gathering at the Sri Petaling mosque in Kuala Lumpur, and the return of one of the attendees' family members.[18] The mass gathering, which was attended by 14,500 Malaysians and 1,500 foreigners, became the largest Covid-19 cluster in the country.[19] It triggered the rapid spread of the disease into the community (from 41 to 190 cases across the country on March 15), prompting the Federal government to enforce its first nationwide Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020 under the Control and Prevention of Infectious Disease Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967.[20]

The Sarawak government heeded the call and immediately launched i-Alerts and EnterSarawak, which were the earliest digital-based initiatives aimed at controlling the disease within the state. i-Alerts has been the state's official disaster communication and information application that provides official information regarding disaster situations such as the

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[17] JPBNS, 2021.
[18] Borneo Post, 2020.
[19] The Star 2020.
[20] New Straits Times, 2020.

Covid-19 pandemic, while EnterSarawak is an application that assists in contactless tracking of inbound and outbound travelers in Sarawak.[21]

Sarawak witnessed an exponential hike in the total number of confirmed Covid-19 cases following an outbreak in Pasai Siong, Sibu that was first detected on 8 January 2021.[22] It accelerated the transmission of the disease within the Sibu division with 229 new cases reported on 22 January 2021, the highest Covid-19 daily cases in Sarawak since the pandemic was declared in March 2020.[23] This prompted the Sarawak government to implement the MCO in Sibu division from 16 January until 28 February 2021.[24] Areas and activities that were most affected during the MCO include the rural areas, particularly the longhouse communities and peoples' movements, especially inter-district and inter-state travels and social gatherings. This state-level MCO was not the first of its kind, as the Sarawak government imposed another MCO (29 May-11 June 2021) that was not aligned with the Federal government's (12 May-7 June 2021). The state-level MCOs also witnessed more stringent standard operating procedures (SOPs) compared to those of the Federal ones. These include, among others, a 10pm-5am curfew (not implemented in West Malaysia), restrictions on outdoor exercise (allowed in West Malaysia), and a limit of 30 per cent worker capacity in Sarawak factories (60 percent was allowed in West Malaysia).[25] Such differences between the Federal approach and state approach received a mixed reception among the people of Sarawak: many applauded the state government for taking extra measures to protect and save Sarawakians, while others were wondering about, and even baffled by, the different ways of handling the pandemic, which raised questions such as "Which/What SOPs to adhere to?", "Will there be another extension of MCO in Sarawak?"

Nevertheless, the Sarawak government continued to take matters into its own hands by developing its own initiatives to control the outbreak. The initiatives, among others, included mobilizing the Sarawak Disaster Management Committee (SDMC) and launching two Covid-19 tracing applications -- CovidTrace and Qmunity – to oversee

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[21] Teo, 2020.
[22] Nurhauni, 2021.
[23] Bong, 2021.
[24] Ling, 2021.
[25] Chiam, 2021.

the mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery efforts during the pandemic.[26] Moreover, Sarawak ranked among the top states in the country for vaccinations, with more than 60 per cent of the population having been vaccinated against Covid-19, owing much to the massive vaccination exercise across the state.[27] This was quite an achievement because Sarawak is geographically the largest of Malaysia's states and has a more limited communication and transportation infrastructure that its West Malaysian counterparts.

The actions of the Sarawak state government were made possible for several reasons, particularly the degree of autonomy and the additional powers that the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah possess as stipulated in the Federal Constitution, and according to the 1963 Malaysia Agreement (MA63).[28] Such autonomy and power have given both states exclusive jurisdiction over areas including local government, immigration, land, forestry and agriculture.[29] The Chief Minister of Sarawak, YAB Datuk Patinggi (Dr) Abang Haji Abdul Rahman Zohari, took pride in the state's way -- or more precisely, "the Sarawak Way" -- of handling the pandemic. This is because, as he argued, "the significance of the Sarawak government's ability and right to maintain self-rule over local affairs of the State is reflected during the Covid-19 pandemic, where decisions made had prioritised the interests of Sarawakians overall".[30] Moreover, the Chief Minister viewed the state's ability to make its own decisions as a reflection of the identity of Sarawakians. As the Chief Minister proffered in his 2021 Sarawak Day message:

> We respect the federal government and decisions made at the federal level but not every decision made in Putrajaya is suitable or practical for implementation in Sarawak. . .The ability to make decisions for the interest of Sarawak should reflect the identity of Sarawakians in determining their future so that the state can be on par with other states or countries that are already ahead.[31]

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[26] Bong, 2020
[27] Dayak Daily, 2021a
[28] Chin, 2019.
[29] Huang, 2009, 49.
[30] Dayak Daily, 2021b
[31] Ibid.

This sentiment was echoed by other state ministers including the late Deputy Chief Minister, Tan Sri Dr. James Jemut Masing, who contended that "The federal government must allow Sarawak and Sabah to chart their Covid-19 exit strategy because the National Recovery Plan (NRP)[32] is not a one-size-fits-all path for when and how states can reopen their economies".[33] Sabah and Sarawak, while not identical in their experiences in handling Covid-19, have both, on occasions, disagreed with the federal government's instructions related to pandemic-related standard operating procedures (SOP). This is partially a result of the lower vaccination rates seen in both states. He further maintained that "the recovery plan must take into account the size of a State, the State's trajectory of Covid-19 pandemic as well as resources, capacity, and challenges".[34]

What becomes clear here is the way in which what Horton refers to as "the politics of Covid-19" has been propelled in Malaysia, in terms of pandemic management, by the divide between the Federal government of Malaysia and the Sarawak state government. Such a divide takes place within the context of a strong sense of regionalism that is linked to Sarawak's different political, social, cultural, and economic development.[35] Yet one question that arises is whether such a politics has an impact on the knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards the disease among the people of Sarawak, who strongly identify themselves as Sarawakian rather than Malaysian first[36], and who generally feel proud of the state's initiatives in dealing with the pandemic 'the Sarawak way'[37]. We can see this sense of pride, for instance, in the comment section of the Sarawak Disaster Information Facebook. Visitors posted thoughtful messages (such as "Good job! proud of you guys", "Well done 👍 to our state government 👏👏👏") to show their appreciation to the state government for enforcing new immigration policies that, it was argued, would keep Sarawak free of Covid-19.

While there have been studies examining Covid-19 in the Malaysian context, little research has been conducted to investigate the disease and

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32 The National Recovery Plan (NRP) or Pelan Pemulihan Negara (PPN) was the government's staged plan to move out of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions.
33 Dayak Daily, 2021c.
34 Ibid.
35 Chin, 2004, 156-168.
36 Lee, 2018.
37 See Sarawak Disaster Information Facebook, 2020.

its impacts on ordinary Malaysians living in specific contexts or settings. Although such research has been undertaken, the focus has been on knowledge, attitudes and practices among the general public during the MCO[38], and among university students in Sarawak[39] and Sabah[40] during specific phases of the pandemic. More needs to be known about ordinary Malaysians living in a context where government at all levels – federal, state, local – plays a vital role in shaping their understanding, stances, and actions regarding the disease.

More importantly, there needs to be an exploration on "the politics of Covid-19" in such a context, where there exists a divide or disconnect between the levels of government in the pandemic response. Therefore, the study examines this further by gathering the views of Sarawakians on their understanding, stances and actions regarding Covid-19, bearing in mind the state government's way, viz. the Sarawak way of handling the pandemic and its impact on the people in this East Malaysian state.

Public Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices towards Covid-19: An Overview

As mentioned earlier, there has been considerable research exploring public knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding Covid-19 across the globe. Such research has been crucial in showing the importance of understanding what is known, what is thought, and what is done by the public about the virus. The research results have a direct bearing on efforts to prevent or mitigate the harmful effects of the disease on people's health and quality of life. Most researchers have employed the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practice (KAP) survey design to inform and guide their research.[41]

According to Launiala (2009), KAP which is also known as the knowledge, attitude, behaviour and practice (KABP) emerged from the

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[38]   Elias et al., 2021.

[39]   Whye et al, 2021.

[40]   Mohd Fazeli et al., 2021.

[41]   A KAP survey design refers to a survey constructed qualitatively and quantitatively to acquire information for policies, and any misunderstandings that may occur in its implementation. Participants are usually selected through a random sampling method. KAP surveys are commonly undertaken by human resource departments of organizations or in the public health sector. See USAID, 2011.

field of family planning and population studies in the 1950s[42]. Earlier surveys that were designed based on the KAP model were designed to measure the extent to which an obvious hostility to the idea and organisation of family planning existed among diverse populations, and to provide information on the knowledge, attitudes and practices in family planning that could be used for programme purposes across the world.[43] The attractiveness of a survey designed using the KAP model lies in its basic characteristics: an easy design, quantifiable data, ease of interpretation and concise presentation of results, generalisability of small sample results to a wider population, cross-cultural comparability, speed of implementation, and the ease with which one can train numerators[44]. This explains the popularity of KAP-based surveys in various fields of study, especially in health care research.[45]

Furthermore, information in KAP surveys is usually gathered by researchers through a structured, standardised questionnaire that may include both quantitative and qualitative data.[46] Open-ended interviews and focus groups may complement the KAP survey to allow further exploration of a situation or problem, and/or to highlight aspects that are not yet known.[47] KAP is a staple method in public health research that can foster and assess an increase in the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of targeted individuals, groups, and communities[48] Moreover, KAP has been regularly used to offer a representative study of a particular population by gathering information on what is known (knowledge), believed (attitude), and done (practice) about a particular health topic (such as hand-washing) during health emergencies and disease outbreaks.[49]

Regarding the research approach, most KAP Covid-19 studies have utilised a cross-sectional design that looked at numerous characteristics at once, namely age, gender, income and the prevailing characteristics of communities where the disease was concerned.[50] These studies, however, vary in the types of samples used such as the general populace

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42 Launiala, 2009.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid
45 Andrare, 2020.
46 World Health Organization, 2014.
47 SPRING, 2011.
48 Laverack, 2018, 23.
49 Ibid.
50 Most, 2020.

or specific segments of the general public, the recruitment methods, the eligibility criteria, data gathering techniques (such as surveys, interviews), statistical analysis, and measurement strategies.[51] This is not to mention the various dimensions of Covid-19 that became the focus of the studies namely transmission, risk infection, antibiotics resistance, screening and lockdown, which led to a deeper understanding of the disease through the generation of new and adequate insights.[52] Despite these variations in research approaches, most studies reported that the participants demonstrated a high level of knowledge and a positive attitude towards the disease while implementing good practices to prevent and mitigate its harmful impacts.[53]

In Malaysia, minorities, particularly those from the lower-income group, demonstrated poor knowledge as a result of limited access to reliable and prompt information about the disease.[54] While most participants held positive attitudes towards the disease (81.5 percent), especially in terms of the way the pandemic was handled by the government of the day and implemented proper preventive measures, practices involving the mandated wearing of masks in public were less common among almost half of the participants (48.8 percent).[55] Two possible contributing reasons were cited: first, mask-wearing is not a norm in Malaysian society, and second, mask-wearing is commonly related to illnesses.[56]

One interesting finding had to do with the participants' overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards the country's overcoming Covid-19, which was attributed to their confidence in the government's drastic mitigation measures, as can be seen in the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO), which prohibited mass movement and gatherings at across the country and closed all business premises except manufacturers, suppliers, retailers and food outlets, as a way to contain the pandemic[57].

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[51]   Devkota, 2021.

[52]   Chee, 2021.

[53]   Saadatjoo et al., 2021.

[54]   Ibid.

[55]   Ibid.

[56]   Ibid.

[57]   Tang, 2020, 1–4. The MCO is a nation-wide mitigation policy that, at various periods during the pandemic, restricted travel across states, districts or national borders. At the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, residents were also not allowed to leave their homes for reasons other than those approved by authorities. The MCO propelled Malaysia to adapt to working from home and remote online learning.

But things have changed considerably since the time period of the study. By late-2021, fierce new Covid-19 waves enveloped countries across the world. Nations ranging from Laos to Thailand in Southeast Asia, and those bordering India such as Bhutan and Nepal, have been reporting significant surges in infections.[58] Malaysia, once praised by the World Health Organization for its united and effective handling of Covid-19, became one of the disease hot spots in Asia and the centre of one of the worst Covid-19 outbreaks in Southeast Asia, with a record of 23,564 new cases and daily deaths at a record high of 233 on 20 August 2021.[59]

Despite massive vaccination efforts via the National Covid-19 Immunisation Program, combined with surveillance containment and the National Covid-19 Recovery Plan, cases soared as the virulent Delta variant spread across the country. Since the pandemic began, Malaysia has had 1,513,024 confirmed positive cases and 13,713 confirmed deaths.[60] People took to social media and the streets to vent their anger, disappointment and frustrations at the government's failure to control the rising waves of Covid-19 (see Figure 2).[61] To aggravate matters, the country descended into political turmoil – on top of the economic, health and social crises caused by Covid-19 – with the coalition partner of the ruling Perikatan Nasional, UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), and the opposition parties calling on the then prime minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, and his cabinet members to resign from their positions.[62]

The situation in Malaysia reminds us of Horton's notion of "the politics of Covid-19" that links a nation's failure in handling the pandemic to the feeling of distrust in the government that Lundgren and McMakin maintained when discussing public knowledge, attitudes and practices, in the context of public health disaster preparedness and response. Lundgren and McMakin are right to say that while some populations may have a distrust or fear of the government and health institutions during disease outbreaks, other populations may be more likely to trust local officials and agencies than federal ones. As this study will show, this is notably true in the case of the people living in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak,

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58   Hong et al., 2021.
59   Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, 2021.
60   Ibid.
61   Pasukan Malaysiakini, 2021.
62   Ibid.

Figure 3.1: Malaysians Staged Anti-Government Protest

who have put their faith, trust and confidence in the state government (albeit in varying ways and degrees) throughout the pandemic period.

Sarawakians' Views on Covid-19

This chapter seeks to explore public knowledge, attitudes and practices towards Covid-19 in Sarawak through the KAP approach to public health research. An online survey consisting of six open-ended questions was conducted using a purposive sample of 20 Sarawakians from diverse backgrounds living in Kuching and Kota Samarahan. It was conducted during the first National Recovery Plan implemented by the Federal government on 16 August 2021. At that time, the SOPs maintained the banning of social gatherings and inter-state and inter-district travel. The sample size reflects the typical sample size for exploratory research which can range between 20 to 150 participants.[63] Open-ended questions were used for two reasons: first, they are often employed in qualitative research methods and exploratory studies, and second, they enable participants to provide more options and opinions while allowing the researcher to take a holistic and comprehensive look at the issue being studied.[64] The online survey was chosen as the main instrument as it offered a means through

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[63] Daniel, 2018, 243.
[64] Allen, 2017, 1716.

which the researcher was able to access people during the pandemic, allowing them a safe and open context in which to divulge their views.[65]

The survey was developed following the KAP approach because it is a representative tool used to collect information from specific populations on what is known, believed, and done concerning a specific field (in this case, a public health crisis).[66] While the main goal of KAP studies are to generate information that can be used to develop strategies aimed at improving the attitudinal and behavioral changes that are driven by the level of knowledge and perceptions towards health preventive practices,[67] this chapter is primarily exploratory as it sought to gain insights and knowledge about a topic that has not been studied or thoroughly investigated in the past.

The first question asked, "What do you know about the Covid-19 situation in Sarawak?" saw opinions split between two different views. The first and more common view was that the situation had worsened. A majority of the participants contended that the Covid-19 situation in the state showed no signs of improvement, with daily confirmed cases rising rather than declining ("500-700 kes harian /500-700 daily cases)", "kes tidak menunjukkan penurunan/cases showing no decrease"). This was despite the massive vaccination exercise across the state, along with the third nationwide Movement Control Order. Some responses were as follows:

> "It is not getting any better even with the implementation of MCO" (Participant 6)

> "The situation is grave and not improving. Vaccination rates have increased but may not be fast enough. The situation will continue to decline unless decisive action is taken." (Participant 18)

The next and least mentioned view was that the Covid-19 situation in the state had improved. Only two respondents held this belief, saying that things were going well, largely as a result of the large-scale state-based vaccination program.

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[65]   Wright, 2005.
[66]   Paul et al., 2020.
[67]   Ibid.

The second question asked was "What do you know about the Sarawak state government's way of handling the Covid-19 situation?" The most frequent responses to this question included "movement control order" "vaccination campaign/program" and "vaccine rollout," as well as "the standard operating procedures (SOP)" for traveling and home quarantine. Some participants cited the role that Sarawak Disaster Management Committee (SDMC) played in managing the pandemic. As the following responses show:

"SDMC were monitoring the number of cases each day and promoting the vaccination program extensively" (Participant 6)

"SDMC *sentiasa mengemaskinikan data penularan pandemik, mengadakan sidang media, sentiasa memberi maklumat perkembangan terkini situasi Covid-19 di Sarawak, beradsarkan kesemua daerah* (SDMC constantly updates pandemic data, holds press conferences, always provides information on the latest developments on the situation of Covid-19 in Sarawak, based on all districts)" (Participant 14)

There were, however, participants, who responded differently to this question from others. The responses included "I don't know much about government intervention", "Information can be confusing" and "Not really coz the govt provides vague explanations". A few participants frankly expressed their dissatisfaction regarding what they knew about the Sarawak state government's way of overseeing and containing the pandemic, as in the following comments:

"Not really coz the govt provides vague explanations. But something is not quite right somewhere or else why would the cases be on the rise/constant high number of cases?" (Participant 3)

"At first, I was very confident that the local authority is able to address the increasing number of Covid cases daily. However, it seems that the end of the tunnel is still far away despite the strict MCO imposed a few months ago. But I believe that the current initiative to speed up vaccinating the public is the best way to reduce the number of daily cases" (Participant 15)

"Too late in implementing lockdown, and too slow in vaccination rollout at the beginning." (Participant 17)

These responses found their way into those the participants offered when they were asked to share their thoughts about the Sarawak state government's way of addressing the Covid-19 situation. A majority of the participants held an unfavourable view towards the way the pandemic was managed by the state government through responses that included "lambat" (slow), "they need to be more strict", "Not working well", and "Lacking much-needed efficiency and competency". Some participants spoke boldly about the state government's way of addressing the pandemic, citing it as a failure and a futile attempt to curb the spread of the disease despite having the autonomy to make decisions that were contrary to the federal ones. Some responses were as follows:

> "The state government always try to go against the announcement by the federal government and this does not make the situation better" (Participant 6)

> "*Saya rasa pihak kerajaan negeri Sarawak perlu melaksanakan MCO yang lebih berkesan atau syarat lebih ketat. Ini kerana MCO sekarang ada banyak kelonggaran. MCO 1.0 yang diadakan tahun lepas lebih berkesan dalam memutuskan talian Covid-19 kerana masa itu MCO dijalankan dengan lebih berkesan dan dengan syarat yang ketat* (I think the Sarawak state government needs to implement a more effective MCO or stricter conditions. This is because the MCO now has a lot of flexibility. The MCO 1.0 held last year was more effective in breaking the Covid-19 chain because at that time the MCO was conducted more effectively and with strict conditions) (Participant 9)

> "Based on the current initiative of vaccinating the public, thus achieving "herd immunity", the effect is yet to be seen. However, based on the previous measures (e.g., enforcing strict MCO), the local government failed to reduce the number of daily cases, from my POV." (Participant 15)

Nevertheless, some participants held a more positive attitude towards the Sarawak state government's way of managing the Covid-19 situation. The responses included "baik" (good), "sistematik dan bersepadu" (systematic and integrated)", and "agak berkesan" (quite effective). Few participants lauded the efforts of the state government in dealing with the pandemic through various initiatives, as indicated in the following comments:

"*Bagi saya, kerajaan Sarawak pro aktif dalam usaha ini* (For me, the Sarawak government is pro-active in this effort)" (Participant 7)

"Take vaccination as an example, it has been done at a quick rate" (Participant 16)

"Better than other states in terms of effectiveness" (Participants 19)

When asked about the actions or measures that they have taken to cope with this situation based on their knowledge and opinions regarding the Sarawak state government's way of handling the Covid-19 situation, almost all participants cited the SOP (social distancing, mask-wearing, hand washing, avoiding crowds) as the most significant, on top of staying at/working from home, practicing "self-discipline" and "self-lockdown" to minimise the risk of infections.

One participant admitted that the SOP had taken a toll on him, while another participant complained of being confused as to which SOPs they should follow given the divide or disconnect between those enforced by the state and the federal ones. As the following responses show:

"Another thing is that the SOP by the local government is way different from the SOP by the Federal gov. To some extent, I feel confused most of the time when the new SOP (by the Federal gov) is out, or I had to wait for the SOP by the local gov which takes some time. So, to cope with this, I have to keep myself updated with the current SOP to avoid breaching it and penalised with a ticket!" (Participant 15)

"I have not eaten outside since March last year. I wear masks and use contact tracing apps when I go out. I have fallen into social isolationism, not meeting any friends physically for months." (Participant 18)

Being Sarawakian and Things that Matter

There were, however, mixed reactions among the participants as to whether the state government's way of managing the Covid-19 situation made them feel proud of being Sarawakian. A small majority of the participants felt proud of being a Sarawakian for several reasons including the state government's decision to close schools, its proactive approach to curbing the spread of the disease, and its success in accelerating the vaccination exercise. A small minority of the participants felt the opposite

for reasons such as being unimpressed with the "flip flop directives" and "the different measures" taken by the state government in contrast to the federal ones. As the following participants explained:

> "The flip flop directive and SOP both at the state and the federal government is not something that I am proud of" (Participant 6)

> "To be honest, I am not proud of the different measures taken (e.g., different SOP than the one provided by the Federal gov)." (Participant 15)

> The remaining participants gave mixed responses, ranging from "not sure", "hard to say", "*belum berasa apa-apa yang bangga*" (haven't felt anything to be proud of yet), and "Not really. What is there to be proud of?".

The final question asking for additional comments allowed the participants to provide insightful and valuable observations on the current Covid-19 situation in Sarawak. Some of the participants contended that the "SOPs should be maintained and enforced" at all levels, besides "[tightening] border control[s] especially interstate and overseas travel." They argued that fines or penalties should be imposed on SOP violators and that more avenues should be set up for the general public to report violations of SOPs so that immediate and effective actions could be taken against these violators. Other participants called for a more rigorous vaccination exercise by "[establishing] more PPVs in the state" and "having more volunteers for the cause", in addition to ensuring that people in rural areas are not left behind. The rest of the participants shared their views, concerns, and suggestions which included "Saya berharap agar kes Covid-19 semakin menurun dan vaksin dipercepatkan (I hope that the number of Covid-19 cases will decrease and the vaccination will be accelerated)", "Kita sepatutnya bertindak lebih pantas dan bijak ("We should act faster and smarter)", "Please take practical actions to help rural folks" and "Total lockdown should be implemented."

Nonetheless, the views of the following participants deserve special mention. This is because such views call attention to how the Sarawak way of dealing with the pandemic influenced the participants' perspectives and understanding of Covid-19. One participant said that rather than thinking about ways to improve Sarawak's status and increase its power,

the state government should help Sarawakians, particularly those in need. Another participant claimed that the divide and disconnect between the Sarawak state government and the federal government in addressing the pandemic had confused the people, mainly non-essential service workers. As the following responses show:

> "People need to be made aware of the dangers of the virus. And help needs to be rendered to all, especially those in need. This is a collective effort but the most important is the state govt needs to show that they are tackling the issue with the people's well-being in mind. Do not think about politics. Now is not the time for that." (Participant 3)

> "*Buat sementara ini, bekerja dari rumah, khasnya bagi sektor bukan esential adalah perlu. Ada kalanya, apa yang kita lakukan lebih baik daripada usaha kerajaan pusat, tetapi ada kalanya kita sebagai rakyat keliru dengan arahan yang berlainan, satu daripada kerajaan pusat, satu dari kerajaan negeri dan seperti kes kami, kena tunggu arahan daripada pihak majikan. Sebaik-baiknya seragamkan supaya tidak timbul kekeliruan* (For now, working from home, especially for non-essential sectors is necessary. Sometimes, what we do is better than the efforts of the central government, but sometimes we as citizens are confused by different instructions, one from the central government, one from the state government and as in our case, have to wait for instructions from the employers. It is best to standardise so that there is no confusion)" (Participant 7)

Covid-19 and The Sarawak Way

The outcome of the public perception survey, produced a mesh of varying responses that reveal Sarawakians' knowledge, attitudes and practices towards Covid-19 within the context of the state government's way of overseeing and containing the pandemic. Many insights can be drawn from these responses.

First, Sarawakians were aware of the goings-on in the state where the pandemic is concerned, despite the disparity in their views on the subject matter. This is hardly surprising given the current Covid-19 situation in Sarawak specifically and Malaysia generally, where concerted efforts at all levels of government were still underway to reduce the rate of infection and mortality.

Second, Sarawakians were aware of the various initiatives taken by the state government, particularly the SDMC, in overseeing and

containing the spread of the disease. This awareness in turn influenced their actions and behaviors, notably their adherence to Covid-19 related SOPs. It comes as no surprise if we consider the fact that these SOPs, which are largely affected by the role that the state and federal governments play in enforcing them, have become ingrained in people's lives and the role that the media plays in spreading information about these SOPs among the general populace.[68] This is evident in reports that show that a majority of Malaysians were steadfast in adhering to the SOPs, which they have been doing since March 2020 and which have now become part of the new normal in their life. [69]

Third, Sarawakians were not shy to express their attitudes towards the state government's way of handling the Covid-19 situation, with a majority displaying an unfavorable view, followed by a minority forming a more positive impression. The differing views bring to light a key insight, that the "politics of Covid-19" has influenced Sarawakians' attitudes towards the disease, primarily the way the pandemic is managed by the state government. The negative view, on the one hand, was formed by Sarawakians' knowledge and awareness of the divide between the state government and federal government with the former having on several occasions gone against the latter's pandemic-related decisions. The positive view, on the other hand, was forged by Sarawakian's knowledge and awareness of the divide between the state government and the governments of other states in Malaysia, in terms of how the former has been more effective and advanced in the implementation of its pandemic-related initiatives. This is somewhat expected since Sarawak, among many of its ongoing state-based initiatives, took the efforts to procure vast vaccine supplies as part of its plan to expedite the immunization process.[70]

Finally, despite the structural limitations and the governments (mis)handling of the pandemic, Covid-19 still encouraged Sarawakians to reflect upon their pride The findings showed that a small majority of the participants felt proud of their identity as a Sarawakian because of the systematic and integrated measures taken by the state government to contain the spread of the disease, while a minority felt otherwise because of the same measures that they viewed as being an abrupt reversal

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[68] Noor Azah et al., 2020.
[69] Bernama, 2021.
[70] Dayak Daily, 2021.

of policy and incompatible with the federal ones. The varying views reinforce the fact that "politics of Covid-19" viz. the divide between the state government and the federal government not only influenced but polarised Sarawakians' views towards Covid-19. Moreover, the dissenting opinions challenge how we view the Sarawak way of managing Covid-19 in that it both facilitates and complicates the state government's initiatives to control the pandemic.

Perhaps the single most important observation that may be gleaned from these findings is the need to acknowledge the diverse voices from grassroots or non-state actors living in specific contexts during the pandemic. Hearing diverse voices in a pandemic has been stressed by many recent scholars including Ibegbuna who argues for its significance in Covid-19 decision-making that can save people's lives, regardless of their background, condition, or circumstance.[71] As Ibeguna further contends:

Hearing diverse voices means proactively seeking them out. If decision-making is to work for all then we must listen harder and make a space at the top tables for a diversity of thought, to allow varied experiences to permeate. The presumption in times of real crisis is that one message must fit all. What happens if the outcomes differ and intersecting factors such as race, age, geography, social class significantly affect life chances? The inclusion of those with knowledge lived experience and trust from more vulnerable communities is key to transmit life-saving messages more quickly and to ensure that information is appropriately tailored.[72]

Taken together with Ibeguna's views, the views of Sarawakians from different walks of life must be taken into consideration by the Sarawak state government (and the federal government) to review effectiveness of containment strategies and mechanisms. This review is very timely and much needed, considering several issues that engulf "the politics of COVID19" and the lives and livelihoods of the people of Sarawak (and Malaysians across the country).

Given the widespread effects of Covid-19 on all facets of life, the study presented in this chapter has examined the Covid-19 upsurge and its implications for ordinary Malaysians with regards to their specific environments and circumstances. To do this, the study elicited and analysed the views of the people of Sarawak regarding their knowledge,

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[71]   Ibegbuna, 2021. 113.
[72]   Ibid.

attitudes, and practices about the Covid-19 pandemic using the KAP study design. The findings revealed that the participants held different views regarding the disease outbreak given their existing ideas and experiences.

Of particular interest were the participants' views on how the Sarawak state government handled the pandemic via the 'Sarawak Way', and the ways this shaped their Covid-19 related views and experiences, as well as their sense of being a Sarawakian at a time of a health crisis. These findings call attention to the importance of acknowledging the nuances that characterize Covid-19 related perceptions and lived experiences among ordinary Malaysians living in specific contexts. Such an undertaking should form part of a strategic and holistic effort to reexamine and reconsider the country's current approaches to this deadly disease.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged on the study population and the methodology. The study was conducted in an exploratory manner, which was informed and guided by the KAP survey design, with relatively small sample size. This raises the question of whether the findings can be generalised to Sarawakians from other parts of the state, and those residing elsewhere. However, by selecting a small participant pool, the study was able to gain insights and knowledge about the phenomenon that has not been studied or thoroughly investigated in the past. Despite its inability to provide a conclusive answer to the phenomenon, the study uncovered issues that can become the focus of future research, especially where the state government's way of handling the pandemic is concerned.

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Index

While the Covid-19 pandemic begins to slowly glide past the horizon, it continues to remind us of its pervasive, enduring existence in our everyday lives in many other ways. Its long reach into the present and future of Malaysia has impacted education, governance, and vulnerable people in the country. In an original and reflective look back at what Malaysia has endured, this book compiles works from diverse scholars in the social sciences and humanities, in an attempt to articulate the many pandemic-related pressing matters that have yet to be addressed.

Through the lenses of social scientists and humanities scholars, the chapters of this book delve into underrepresented issues pertaining to Covid-19 that lie beyond the scope of medicine and public health, altogether unpacking, problematising and investigating the lived realities of other forgotten centres in Malaysia. This is a book that is recommended to scholars, students, and the curious public eager to learn more about the many lesser-known impacts of Covid-19, and how the social sciences and humanities can help us understand social issues that are consequential to security and healthcare.

In a series of insightful, bold, and at times heartbreaking discussions into life at the time of Corona, "Revisiting Covid-19 in Malaysia" offers new and important ways people and states react and adapt to life and what they must do to survive.