

COVID AND MISINFORMATION IN MALAYSIA: A DISCUSSION WITH DR. SERINA RAHMAN

Dr. Serina Rahman is a Visiting Fellow at the Malaysia Programme and the Regional Economics Studies Programme, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) – Yusof Ishak Institute. A conservation scientist and environmental anthropologist, she is fascinated with all facets of Malaysia's rural outskirts. Her varied publications are all tributaries of this interest, ranging from rural politics to poverty and livelihoods to socioeconomic values of coastal habitats and the Islamic radicalization of rural women. She was awarded the Iskandar Malaysia Social Hero Award 2014 (for Environmental Protection – Individual), and is the Malaysian Ambassador for Citizen Science Asia. She is also an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. Harsh Mahaseth, Research Analyst at CSEAS, spoke with Dr. Rahman regarding COVID-19 and misinformation in Malaysia.



Picture Courtesy: Dr. Serina Rahman

As this is quite an interesting topic with an interconnection between fake news, an incessant political battle for power, and the COVID-19 pandemic, can you shed light on their interconnectedness?

I wrote a commentary on this in FULCRUM some time ago that elaborates a little, but the crux of the matter is that there is an ongoing political battle happening in amongst Malaysian political parties. The current PM Muhyiddin Yassin came into power without the public mandate of an election, and the existing (at the time) Pakatan Harapan, which was voted in during GE14, was unceremoniously deposed.

As a consequence, there has been a constant battle to regain power, political hopping to whichever party a politician might feel will hold power or will be more beneficial for themselves etc. So with this in the background, there is a measure of distrust between the people and the politicians. Not only because they seem more concerned with preserving their position and power than with the people, but also because there is a history of u-turns and going back on what they say or promise to the electorate. At the same time, because there are so many attempts to prove who is in control by myriad parties, there is inconsistency (and some incompetency) in the Covid-related information that comes out. The people have put more faith in messaging and instructions from the Ministry of Health, in particular from its Deputy-General, Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah. However, even that of late has made mistakes in its announcements and declaration, leading to u-turns. In and amongst that murkiness are political trolls who purposely spread misinformation via WhatsApp and Facebook, especially amongst rural folk, and this has led to some thinking that Covid is fake, not more than a severe flu, a political tool to control the people (especially since the state of emergency was declared). In some states such as Sarawak, there are also multiple tiers of decision-making, so at the state and regional level, there are other announcements and instructions given with regards to Covid-restrictions, which differ from Federal instructions, leading to even more confusion. In short, it is a mix of distrust of politicians given the Government's instability, too many heads issuing conflicting instructions and purposeful dissemination of fake news to create instability and confusion.

During a pandemic, having unverified alternative views being published can be detrimental. What steps can the Government take to handle the situation better?

A single consolidated sensible instruction that is simple and makes sense would be best. We had that for a while, where information was solely coming from DG Noor Hisham, but that seems to have evolved. Consistency in the calculation of numbers would also help (currently, they only test symptomatic individuals, and so many wonder if numbers are correct - there are also discrepancies and sudden silence on the reporting of migrant worker testing). But as I mentioned earlier, with more decentralized decision-making to account for local conditions, this consolidated single instruction is difficult. It is also almost impossible to get the different political parties to agree on what needs to be done or said as they are all battling to show their superiority in handling the matter (for political mileage). So the ideal is difficult to achieve.

People from the rural areas have contentions raged between whether the pandemic is actually a hoax to doubts regarding the cause of the deaths and whether it is actually due to COVID-19 or not. What can the Government do to build trust with its rural population?

Not all political parties have a good grassroots connection with rural areas. This is usually the purview of UMNO and PAS (in the northeast region). Information spreads through rural areas now through WhatsApp, Facebook and other social media sites, and of course, the regular gathering at food stalls, jetties, farmer's rest places etc. There is also a huge discrepancy between realities in rural areas and the urban government centre. So again, this leads to miscommunication (the Government does not know HOW to speak to rural folks) and distrust (because of negative or condescending insinuations that are often spouted by those in power about rural people). Those issues need to be repaired, but they are long-term structural issues.

If the Government can get people out to the ground to chat with regular people who sit at food stalls, jetties, and rest places - then the right information might be spread properly, but this requires a huge effort given the size of the country and the spread of the rural community. And even if that is done, there is always distrust by the rural folk of anyone new that comes in to speak to them from 'the outside'. The rural community will usually only believe it if they see something happening before their eyes. For example, someone close to them gets Covid, goes into ICU and dies. If not, they will struggle to believe what they cannot understand and do not see.

Can you tell us about the new law to tackle fake news and whether this is related to the problem of misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic? Was such a legislation necessary under the Government's emergency powers? What is problematic about this new law, and how effective it can be?

I don't look at laws per se, so I don't know the details. I am not qualified to answer this. But I am aware that such a law has the danger of being misused to control the information that is being disseminated. It is easy for someone in power to say that something factual is fake news simply because it is information that they don't want disseminated. This is a very real possibility anywhere in the world, but again, I am not qualified to answer this question.

Fake news and the incessant political battle for power will not help those who are fearful and suffering as a result of COVID-19 or its economic fallout. In your article for Fulcrum, you discuss the need for health authorities to disclose accurate and accessible information to rural communities. Can you elaborate on that and also suggest what further measures can be taken?

Similar to the earlier answer - yes, accurate information has to be released and in a manner that is easy to understand. The Health Ministry's reporting has improved tremendously since Covid happened - they are a great source of information. Bernama, the news outlet, also has great infographics to explain the issues. There are also a few social media groups that try to explain what's going on. But these are not sources that rural folk will turn to. So the urban population might be aware, but the rural folk not so. This content would be more effective in the local language (Bahasa Malaysia) and disseminated by WhatsApp. The health authority was sending out text messages to everyone for a while, but that's gone quiet, and the information tended to be short and instructive. Perhaps sending out information through religious entities (places of worship: mosques or temples) - clan houses (for Chinese rural areas) etc., might be best. But poisoning the mix is the fake news disseminated by political trolls to create confusion - AND those trying to make a quick buck by selling magical or consumable cures to Covid. It is hard for people to discern what is real and what is fake, especially when they don't understand issues related to a pandemic, and this is unprecedented. Even 'official notices' with letterhead etc., have been proven fake. The health authority has, many times in the past, issued 'fake news' notices to dispute what was being sent out.