

Individual, community empowerment among strategies in Putrajaya's Covid-19 exit policy?

KUALA LUMPUR: Putrajaya's move to reopen almost all sectors of the economy in stages has been seen as one of the strategies in the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government's exit policy to address the global pandemic which has affected the country since January last year.

The exit policy emphasises on efforts to increase public awareness of and compliance with new the new norm (wearing face masks, maintaining physical distancing and personal hygiene) and standard operating procedures (SOP) to curb the pandemic with the government playing only a role in terms of law enforcement and monitoring of SOP compliance.

In other words, with the exit policy, every individual, family, community and the economic sector will be empowered to voluntarily take care of each other while the government strives on reviving the economy, luring foreign investors, creating jobs, ensuring public access to the vaccine and safeguarding national borders.

Now, the lingering questions are: Is this the best option Putrajaya has and are the people ready for it?

After more than a year of fighting against three waves of Covid-19, the PN government led by Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin should have realised that the mechanisms like the Movement Control Order (MCO) have negative implications for the country's economic growth and people's livelihood.

It was proven when the country's economy shrank by 3.4 per cent in the fourth quarter or contracted 5.6 per cent in the entire economic year of 2020. The people's livelihood was also badly affected as the National Statistics Department's data revealed that over 772,000 individuals were unemployed, bringing the national unemployment rate in December last year to 4.8 per cent.

According to an economic expert from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Assoc Prof Dr Ahmed Razman Abdul Latiff, the government's recent move to reopen more economic sectors with emphasis given on SOP compliance was appropriate and was indeed an initial step of the exit policy in addressing Covid-19 by balancing both the economic and the people's safety factors.

"The level of people's compliance

with the SOP is quite high...only 1.5 per cent is still flouting. We have to put trust in the people, economic activities should be allowed to resume for their survival," he told Bernama.

Since the middle of last year, the government has taken bold and effective moves to cushion the impact of the pandemic on the national labour market through the Prihatin Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package (PRIHATIN) and the National Economic Recovery Plan (PENJANA).

Acknowledging that initiatives such as wage subsidy programmes, small- and medium-scale enterprise (SME) grants and financial assistance had really helped the people within a certain period, Ahmed Razman said economic activities still need to be boosted up amid the new norm and strict SOP.

"We can't just simply shut down the economy (MCO). It will need a lot of time to bounce back," said Ahmed Razman referring to the implementation of MCO2.0, which was aimed at solving the screening backlog issue and reducing the number of Covid-19 infection cases by the end of this month.

Public health expert, Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman of UPM also agreed that what was more important was the efforts to empower individuals and the community to adapt to the new norm and comply with the SOP.

"The virus is already in the community. There are over 50,000 active cases. What's equally important is to continue to educate and enhance awareness among the public," she said, adding that the government's move to extend the vaccination to foreigners was also good.

So maybe the empowerment of individuals, community and economic sector to adapt to the new norm, SOP compliance and taking care of each other is the optional exit policy for the government to address Covid-19, which was anticipated to continue to be active until 2023.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has also warned that people in poor countries will not be vaccinated until 2023 - leaving the world not fully safe for the next three years.

So far, the daily Covid-19 infection cases in Malaysia is showing a four-digit number or around 3,000 cases,

and the Ministry of Health (MOH) is reportedly optimistic that the number will decline by two to three digits daily in May with the MCO2.0 in force until Feb 18.

It is learned that the government, through the National Security Council (MKN) special meeting on Covid-19 will also continue implementing strict control measures at the country's borders.

This is done on the MOH's advice to avoid the risks and threats of the new mutation of the virus which could affect the effectiveness of the vaccine to be used in Malaysia.

The fact that less than 10 daily import cases were reported in Malaysia proves the effectiveness of border control implemented so far, and the decrease in R-naught infectivity rate to 0.8 in Sabah was also associated with effective cross-border control in the state.

Putrajaya was also reported to have stepped up the Covid-19 screening process including for foreign workers, which has been made mandatory starting this month, besides planning to provide free vaccines to foreigners in Malaysia.

"In vaccine science, if there are more vaccine recipients, then we are safe and the virus cannot infect others," Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation Khairy Jamaluddin was quoted as saying when asked on the government's decision to offer free vaccinations to all citizens and non-citizens in the country. It was reported last Thursday that the government had agreed to roll out the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme at the end of this month, with Muhyiddin to be the first person to be vaccinated with the Pfizer vaccine to give confidence to the public that the vaccine is safe.

The government is targeting 80 per cent of the country's population or 26.5 million individuals receiving the vaccines which are to be given free in three phases with the first involving frontline personnel, followed by the high-risk groups in the second phase and adults, aged 18 and above in the third phase.

One thing for sure, the national immunisation programme is among the government's major strategies in ensuring the people's safety and the survival of the country's economy when the MCO is eased, or eventually lifted one day. - Bernama