

# HOW MALAYSIA DEALT WITH COVID-19 SPREAD? A CASE STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ENFORCEMENT

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## ABSTRAK

*The Movement Control Order (MCO) is a form of lockdown imposed in Malaysia following the widespread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper reviews how Malaysia has successfully intervened and curbed the raging pandemic using several types of MCOs undertaken under several phases. The success of Malaysia in managing the transmission of the pandemic is due to rapid reaction in implementing preventative measures. The pandemic is truly a blessing in disguise as the number of criminal activities and road accidents plummeted significantly. Although the pandemic is far from over, continuous intervention must be undertaken, at least until a safe and effective vaccine becomes available.*

**Keywords:** *movement control order, enforcement mechanisms, Malaysia*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Corona Virus Disease 2019 or COVID-19 stems from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome – Corona Virus 2 (SARS-Cov-2) and Middle East Respiratory syndrome related corona virus (MERs-CoV) (Chang, Lin, Wei, Xie, Zhu, Cruz, & Sharma, 2020; Liu, Zhang, Chen, Xiang, Song, Shu, & Wu, 2020) outbreak has affected the whole world in the most unprecedented manner. Various forms of lockdown were implemented to curb the raging pandemic resulting in disruptions in economic activities, breaking the global supply chain, erupting financial system disturbances, and seeing the stock market walking on eggshells for an unforeseeable future. The global economy slowed down which is expected to be worse than the 1930s Great Depression.

Businesses were curtailed due to measures of lockdown which dampen consumer spending to only essential goods and put demand for other non-essential goods at bay. COVID-19 had even overshadowed the on-going US-China trade, political and technology war. The magnitude of the impact of the pandemic becomes more severe when businesses were compelled to downsize or close during the pandemic hence behavioural changes in the workplace and social setting becomes inevitable. Countries around the world had chosen different type of approaches in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, South American countries such as Chile, Brazil and Argentina chose not to impose strict forms of lockdown to avoid economic downturn. On the other hand, most countries in the South East Asian region such as Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan choose different degrees of lockdown, quarantine and some other restrictions to curb the spread of the pandemic.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020b) COVID-19 causes respiratory infections in humans which could lead to death. In the absence of safe and viable vaccine, COVID-19 treatment is based on the symptoms and prevention. COVID-19 spreads through direct and indirect contact via respiratory droplets or secretion droplets which are released from the mouth or nose. When an infected person sneezes, coughs, talks or even sing, another person with close contact may be infected if the droplets enters their body through the mouth, nose or eyes. COVID-19 was declared a public health emergency by WHO on 30 January 2020 which alerted countries around the world to start preparing for a possible large-scale community pandemic. Preventative measures came in the form of movement control order which was relaxed and alternative measures in the form of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI) were implemented. The NPI measures implemented in Malaysia include Enhanced and Targeted Movement Control Order (EMCO and TEMCO) in areas with high cases; children below the age of 12 were allowed to wear face shields instead of facemasks. Other NPI include communicating good habits such as physical distancing, frequently washing and sanitizing our hands, avoid touching MEN (mouth, eyes and nose), coughing and sneezing using tissues or in the bent elbow, avoiding social and mass gatherings and frequently cleaning and disinfecting touched objects and surfaces.

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This paper explores how Malaysia implemented her own version of lockdown, the issues and challenges and discusses some post-MCO strategies to limit local and international transmission of the disease from 18 March to 1 June 2020. However, the discussion in this paper is limited to data availability from frontline agencies involved in MCO implementation. The next section narrates the background of the spread of COVID-19 in Malaysia followed by the phases of MCO. Section 4 discusses the enforcement mechanisms and section 5 illustrates the achievements after the implementation of MCO. The penultimate section discusses the issues and challenges and the final section concludes.

## **2. BACKGROUND OF COVID-19 IN MALAYSIA**

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia is one of the countries affected by the US-China trade war which started in 2017, as trade with China and the US constitutes more than 10 percent of total trade. In January and early February 2020, the PH government had noted the spread of the pandemic but allowed all economic activities to operate as usual as the spread of the virus during that particular period was relatively low. Since of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China, only 22 accumulated cases were reported as of 27 February 2020. The cases were mainly contracted by non-citizen tourists from China and Malaysian returning from China or having meetings with delegates from China in other countries. Following the resignation of the 7<sup>th</sup> Premier on 24 February 2020 due to his belief that he no longer held the majority support of the Member of Parliaments (MP), Malaysia became politically unstable. In view of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in China and other countries via movement of people across borders, the *Yang Dipertuan Agong*, the King of Malaysia by provision of the Federal Constitutions decided not to hold an election and elected a new prime minister based on interviews with MPs and consultation with party leaders. On 29 February 2020, Tan Sri Muhyidin Yassin was appointed as the new Premier and when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020, Malaysia emerged as one of the countries who choose to implement a form of lockdown to slowdown the spread of the pandemic. Malaysia Royal Police (Polis Diraja Malaysia or PDRM) was entrusted as the lead agency to enforce the movement control order.

The first wave of COVID-19 pandemic was basically under control with accumulated cases of less than 100 in February 2020. Most of the reported cases under the first wave were imported cases by tourists from Wuhan, China (Abdullah, 2020) with the first reported case on 25 January 2020. The first Malaysian tested positive was reported on 3 February 2020 with a travel history to Singapore for business meeting. The Seri Petaling cluster marked the initial three-digit increase in COVID-19 cases following the *Tabligh* annual religious congregation accommodating more than 14,000 participants between 27 February 2020 to 1 March 2020. A total of 3,375 positive cases were epidemiologically linked to this cluster, making it the biggest cluster in Malaysia as of June 2020. This was followed by another church religious congregation in Kuching, Sarawak which sparked a new cluster transmission of COVID-19 involving 191 accumulated cases. In less than one (1) week, the number of COVID-19 cases jumped from 99 cases on 8 March to 200 cases by mid-March 2020. With the newly formed government being in power in just two (2) weeks, Malaysia instituted an early intervention via the movement control order (MCO) to seriously combat the pandemic.

### **3. THE MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER**

The Movement Control Order (MCO) was instituted based on the constitutional provision under the Section 3 Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Act 1988. Enforcement of this act is undertaken by the Royal Malaysia Police (*Polis Diraja Malaysia* or PDRM), supported by Malaysia Armed Forces (*Angkatan Tentera Malaysia* or ATM) and other agencies such as the Immigration Department (JIM), Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APMM), *Jabatan Sukarelawan Malaysia* (RELA) under the Ministry of Home Affairs and local authorities in all thirteen (13) states and three (3) federal territories in Malaysia.

MCO in Malaysia has undergone seven (7) phases in line with the development of COVID-19, with the eighth (8<sup>th</sup>) phase ongoing until the end of year 2020. The first movement control order was instituted from 18-31 March 2020 as the number of daily cases spiked to a total 238 cases on 14 March 2020. The MCO was further extended for another two (2) weeks from 1 – 14 April 2020 as the number of daily cases continued to rise to a total of

3463 cases by 4 April 2020. The third phase of MCO continued from 15-28 April 2020. The fourth MCO was between 29 April – 12 May 2020 where more sections of the economy were allowed to gradually open up their business activities under strict standard operating procedures (SOP). The fifth MCO spanned from 13 May – 9 June 2020 where more restrictions were lifted such that more segments of the society began to embrace their new normal way of life. Recovery MCO began in 10 Jun – 31 August 2020 followed by its extension from 1 September – 31 December 2020. Table 1 summarizes the timeline of implementation of various types of MCO. To curb local transmission, enhanced or temporary MCO would be implemented in areas with sudden spike of COVID-19 cases or areas with high number of accumulated active cases.

As the government began to open up the economy, imported cases is slowly on the rise compared to local transmission from June to early July 2020. These imported cases later lead to a sudden rise in local transmission in July 2020 especially from the *Tawar*, *Sungai* and *Telaga* clusters in Kedah and *Benteng Lahad Datu* cluster in Sabah. To avert the exponential surge of COVID-19 cases, the MKN imposed Temporary Movement Control Order (TEMCO) in districts or zones with active and increasing cases in the states of Perlis, Kedah, Sarawak and Sabah in August and September 2020. On 2 August 2020, five (5) schools in Kedah were closed due to Sivagangga cluster and Restricted Movement Control Order (RMCO) was imposed on the locals. By 7 and 8 August 2020, several mosques in the Perlis and Kedah have been ordered temporary closure in the light of increasing COVID-19 cases in these states followed by Penang imposing stricter SOPs after the sudden jump in the number of cases in the state. Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO) was imposed in the Amanjaya, Kedah (*Tawar* cluster) from 28 August 2020 to curb the sudden surge in COVID-19 infection. Following the sudden spike in *Sungai* cluster, Kota Setar district was announced as a red zone beginning 9 September 2020. In summary, within the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) which was extended until 31 December 2020, stricter forms of movement control orders were imposed on districts, states and areas with sudden increase in COVID-19 cases. The intervention in the form of MCO at state level had played an important role to continue protect the rest of the country from COVID-19 spikes.

**Table 1: Types of MCO and Timeline**

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Type</b>
Phase 1	18 -31 March 2020	Movement Control Order
Phase 2	1 – 14 April 2020	Movement Control Order
Phase 3	15 – 28 April 2020	Movement Control Order
Phase 4	29 April – 3 May 2020	Movement Control Order
Phase 5	4 – 12 May 2020	Conditional Movement Control Order
Phase 6	13 May – 9 June 2020	Conditional Movement Control Order
Phase 7	10 June – 31 August 2020	Recovery Movement Control Order
Phase 8	1 September – 31 December 2020	Recovery Movement Control Order

Source: Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia (2020)

#### **4. ENFORCEMENT MECHANISM**

The first step towards an effective management of COVID-19 enforcement was to ensure a clear and operative line of command. Enforcement instructions with clear directive instructions include:

- (i) Full manning of Malaysia Call Center (MCC) was made fully operational beginning 18 March 2020.
- (ii) Flow of communication must be via District Call center (DCC) and Contingent Call Center (CCC) to MCC.
- (iii) Monitoring and compliance of MCO undertaken through patrolling and smart deployment.

- (iv) All enforcement activities must be recorded in written form and pictures in the COVID-19 Diary.
- (v) Press statement can only be done by Inspector General of Police (IGP) and Deputy IGP especially on matters involving national security policies.
- (vi) Press conferences can only be done by the Prime Minister, Defense Minister and Director General of Health.
- (vii) No aid should be given for road accidents until the arrival of ambulance.
- (viii) Officials enforcing roadblocks are required to request for travel documentations.
- (ix) During the first phase of MCO, only one (1) person is allowed in one (1) vehicle.
- (x) District Police Chief is responsible for all quarantine centers in their district.
- (xi) All contingent must submit their compliance assessment and all other information to MCC.
- (xii) Movement related to food supply is allowed in all types of MCO.

Over the different phases of MCO, a number of improvements and enhancement of procedures in enforcement had been undertaken. These enhancements include:

- (i) Arrest of COVID-19 offenders were conducted in a prudent and professional manner.
- (ii) Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) must be correctly worn by all staffs.
- (iii) Roadblocks were placed at toll plazas to control inter-state movement.
- (iv) Enhancement of border security control to curb illegal entry of illegal immigrants and non-Malaysians.
- (v) COVID-19 offenders were given compound instead of arresting them to avoid prison overcrowding.
- (vi) Heavy Good Vehicles (HGV) and Public Service Vehicles (PSV) are only allowed to travel at night.
- (vii) A special court designed for MCO violation cases.

- (viii) Use of Police Act 1967 to command the return of retired police to assist enforcement during critical period.
- (ix) Usage of Geofencing to monitor Person Under Investigation (PUI).
- (x) Extensive use of *Gerak Malaysia* and *MySejahtera* to monitor movements.
- (xi) Extensive use of Geographical Information System (GIS) to identify locations for roadblocks to ensure smart deployment of officers.
- (xii) Deployment of drones in selected areas.

Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) devised a mechanism to track and evaluate measures to ensure compliance of standardized operating procedures to inhibit further spread of COVID-19. Daily meetings were held to evaluate five (5) important aspects:

- (i) The degree of compliance toward MCO
- (ii) Enforcement of MCO
- (iii) Criticisms, problems or comments on matters related to the implementation of MCO
- (iv) Measures to improve enforcement of MCO
- (v) Criminal activities and non-compliance of MCO

Effective 7 September 2020, Malaysia barred entry of citizen from countries with more than 150,000 COVID-19 accumulated cases into Malaysia to curb the sudden spike in local COVID-19 cases emanating from non-citizens entering Malaysia in August 2020. The list of 23 countries identified by the Immigration Department include United States, Brazil, India, Russia, Peru, Colombia, South Africa, Mexico, Spain, Argentina, Chile, Iran, Bangladesh, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, France, Turkey, Italy, Germany, Iraq, Philippines and Indonesia. The entry bar is valid for long term pass holders, residents of Malaysia with permanent status, participants of Malaysia *My Second Home*, expatriates and professional visit pass holders.

Finally, the government's exit strategy following the reduction in the number of daily cases was implemented on 7 June 2020 under the Recovery MCO. The government decided to relax the restrictions under MCO to the general public in the following manner:



- (i) Cross-state movement was allowed except in areas declared as EMCO or TEMCO.
- (ii) Almost all economic activities were allowed to operate in stages with strict conformity of the SOP.
- (iii) All commercial activities involving sales and marketing in non-premise are allowed to operate with strict adherence to the SOP.
- (iv) Schools and other learning institutions will be gradually opened in stages.

However, a few sectors such as pub, discothèques, entertainment outlets, karaoke, theme parks, activities involving mass congregation are not allowed. Latest SOPs involving new norms such as avoid 3C – Crowded places, Confined spaces and Close conversations are currently available on MKN's website. The government has also introduced the concept of '*green bubble*' where borders will be opened for entry from countries with low COVID-19 cases with enhanced post-COVID-19 SOPs.

## **5. IMPACT OF MCO FROM ENFORCEMENT PERSPECTIVE**

A survey was conducted by IPSOM and UiTM on the perceived effectiveness of MCO. The main findings of the report suggested that in general, the public perceived the implementation of MCO in Malaysia was successful in curbing the spread of COVID-19. Information was well channelled through television, radio networks and all forms of social media platforms to the general public. At state level, the Information Department employed '*Van Viral*', a van that travels through the rural areas to make announcements on COVID-19 to ensure that all segments of the society received important updates on COVID-19 especially when MCO was first imposed on 18 March 2020. Majority of the respondents lauded government efforts to ensure effective dissemination of information on COVID-19 enforcement efforts in an effective, accurate and transparent manner.

The respondents concurred that accurate and transparent information had helped them understand the importance of SOP compliance to help flatten the COVID-19 curve. MKN had religiously sent messages on almost every day basis to remind the general public on the importance of complying all the

procedures and new norms to combat COVID-19. The respondents noted that the information relayed to them as reliable since all announcements were made by the Prime Minister, the Defense Minister and the Director General of Health from the Ministry of Health. Majority of the respondents agreed to give full cooperation in complying with procedures and instructions from the government from time to time. The roadblocks imposed during the first and the second MCO were undertaken in the most professional manner by PDRM where the public were professionally interrogated when requesting to move between countries, going to work or running errands.

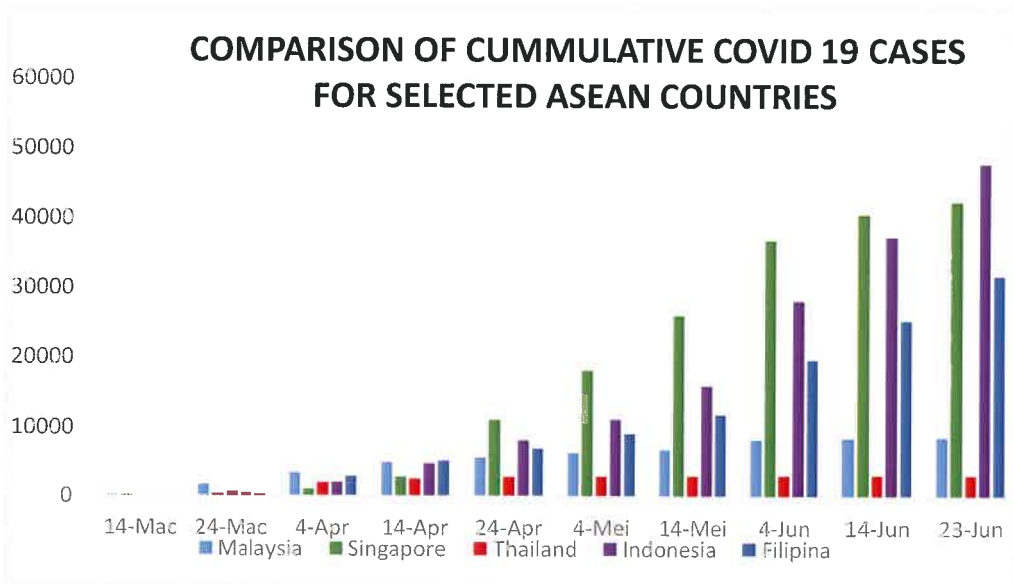
Figure 1 shows the performance of Malaysia in comparison with selected ASEAN countries. In March 2020, COVID-19 cases were highest amongst the ASEAN countries which led to the imposition of MCO. By May 2020, Malaysia had succeeded in lowering the number of daily and accumulated cases whilst Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines continued to record rapid increase in the number of daily cases. Thailand also remained relatively low due to certain degree of lockdown implemented in the country. Despite implementing ‘*circuit breaker*’ which is the Singapore’s version of lockdown, the country continued to record spikes in the number of cases. Therefore, early lockdown curbs the pandemic and provides an edge for faster economic recovery.

Figure 2 and 3 illustrate the number of COVID-19 related cases by state. Selangor and Johor recorded the largest COVID-19 related arrests and the highest number of compounds. This is not surprising since both Selangor and Johor are categorized as larger states with higher population compared to other states in Peninsular Malaysia. Figure 4 shows the cross-country requests from 18 March to 1 June 2020. Majority of cases were approved at 96.81% and only a small number of cross-country requests is being rejected. Rejections were due to incomplete documents or travelling without valid documents. Figure 5 shows the number of roadblocks, manpower involved in interstate roadblocks, the number of vehicles checked, and the number of vehicles asked to turn back.

COVID-19 related crimes leading to arrest were committed largely by the 26-45 age cohort (53.78%) followed by youngsters between 19 – 25 years old at 24.54% and 46 years and above (14.59%). Figure 6 presents the

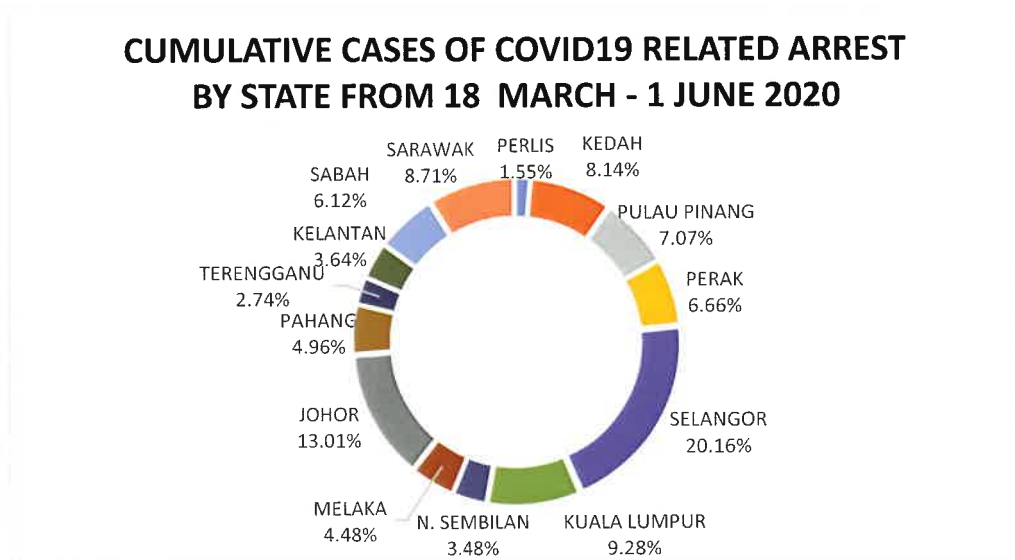
breakdown according to age cohorts. Most of the crimes were committed by unemployed (33.35%) and labourer (21.18%) as shown in Figure 7. Other category of employment record lower percentage of COVID-19 violations. Figures 8-10 present the crime indices for overall, violence and property crime. In general, the implementation of MCO in the first phase had temporarily suppressed crime. Once MCO is being relaxed, crime rate returned to its usual statistics.

**Figure 1: Comparison of Cumulative COVID-19 Cases for Selected ASEAN countries**



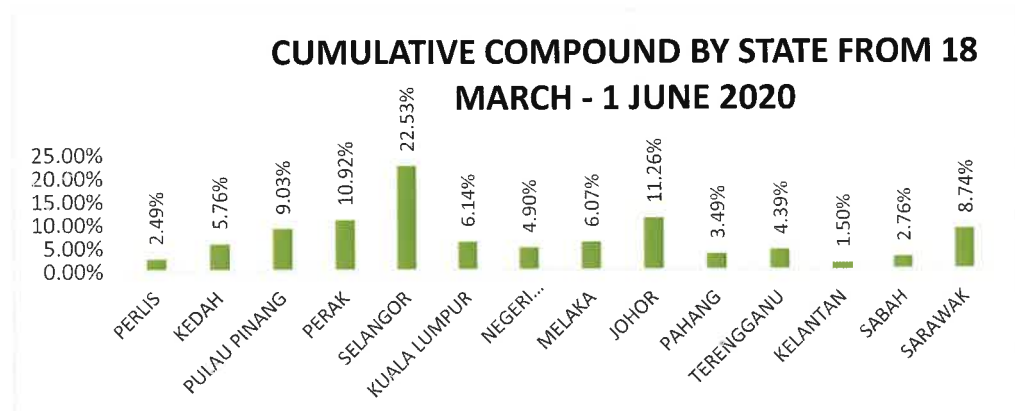
Source: KKM (2020)

**Figure 2: Cumulative Cases of COVID-19 Related Arrest by State From 18 March to 1 June 2020**



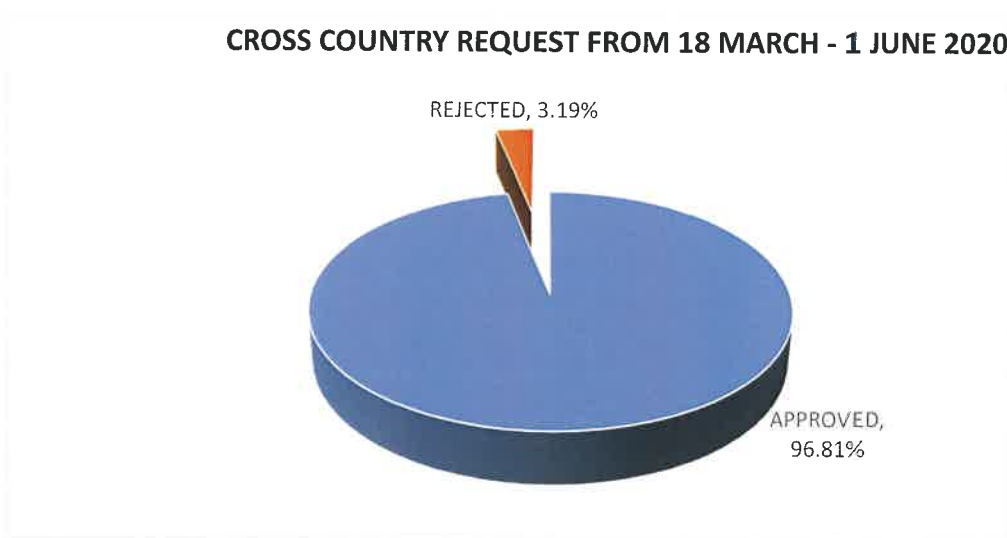
Source: PDRM (2020)

**Figure 3: Cumulative Compound by State From 18 March – 1 June 2020**



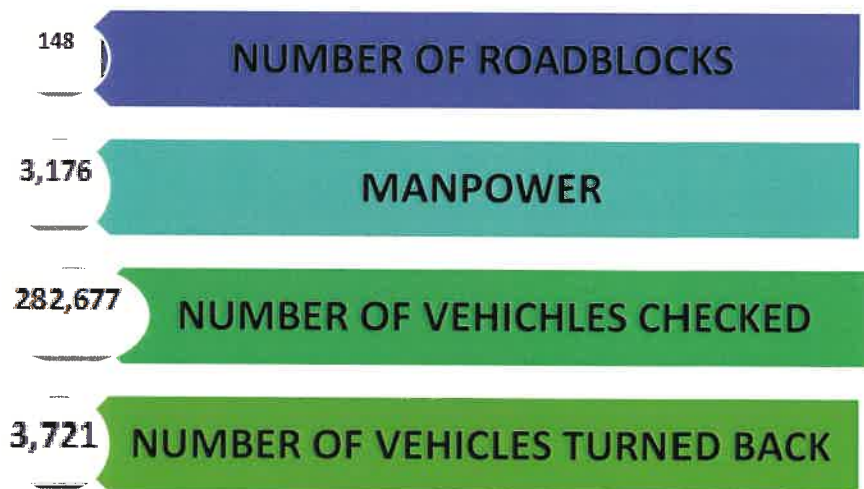
Source: PDRM (2020)

**Figure 4: Cross Country Request from 18 March – 1 June 2020**



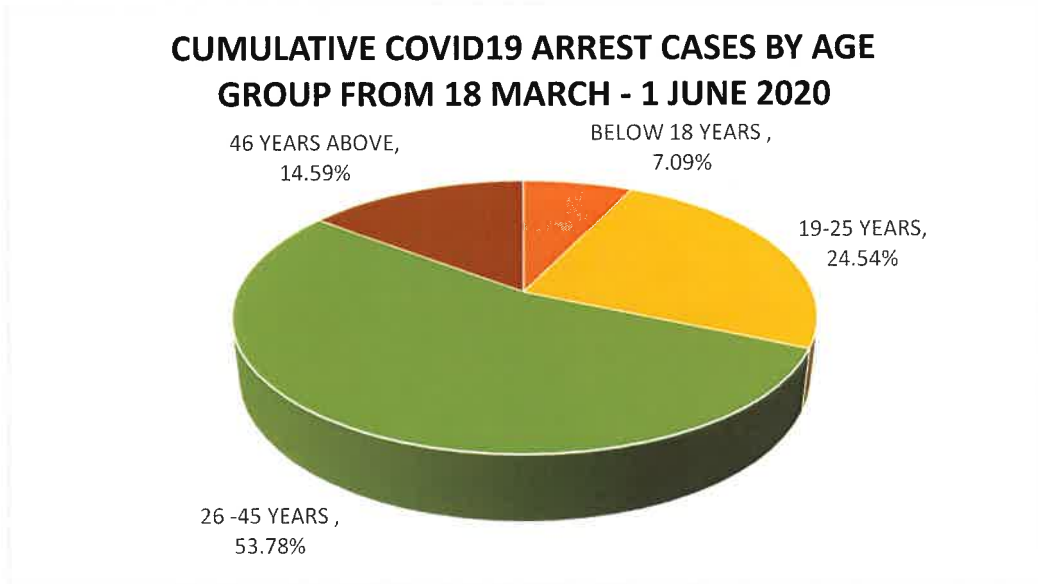
*Source: PDRM (2020)*

**Figure 5: Interstate Roadblocks from 18 March – 1 June 2020**



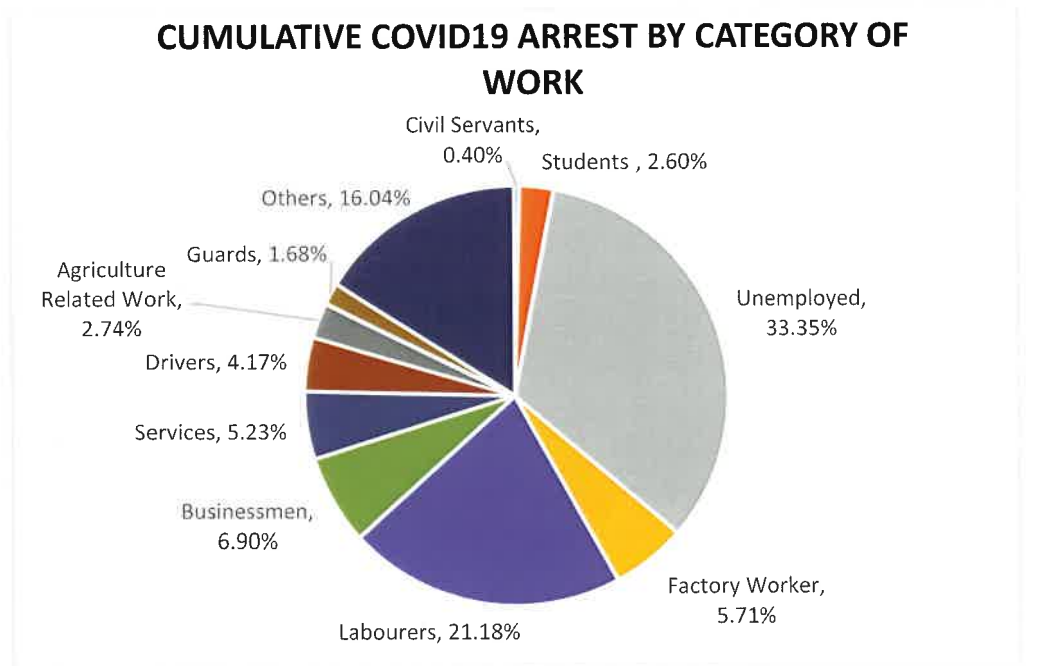
*Source: PDRM (2020)*

**Figure 6: Cumulative COVID-19 Violations By Age Group**



Source: PDRM (2020)

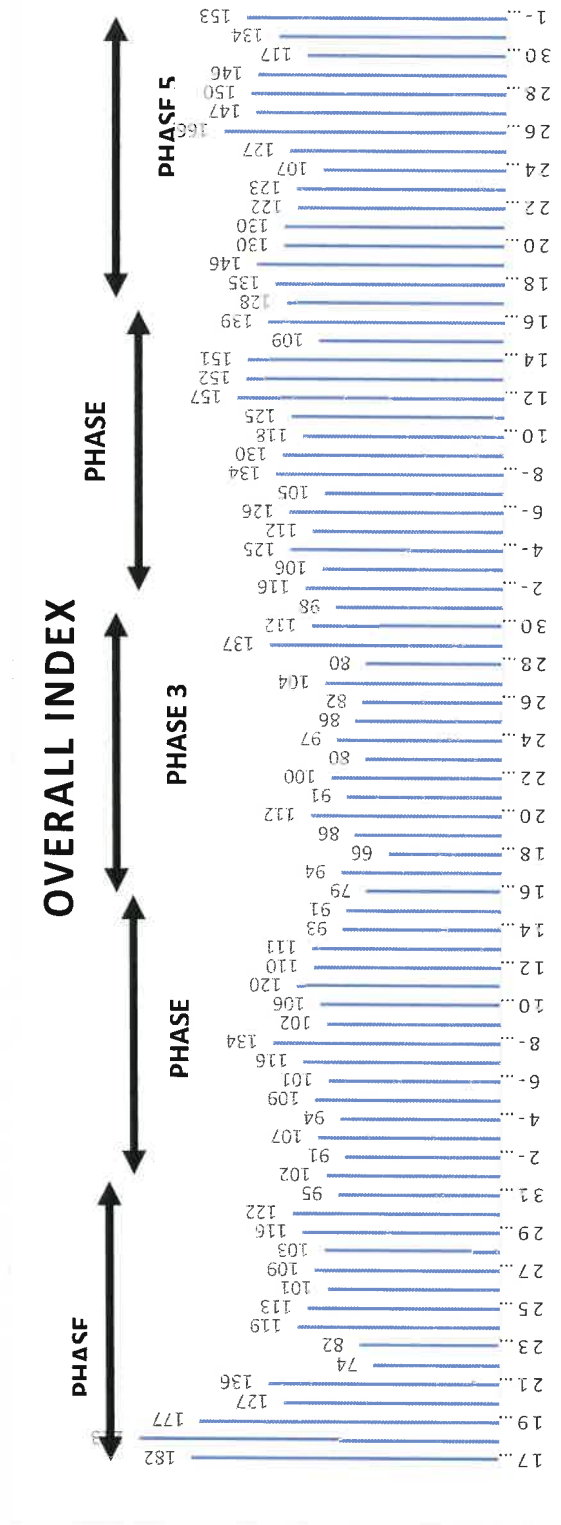
**Figure 7: Cumulative COVID-19 Arrest by Category of Work**



Source: PDRM (2020)

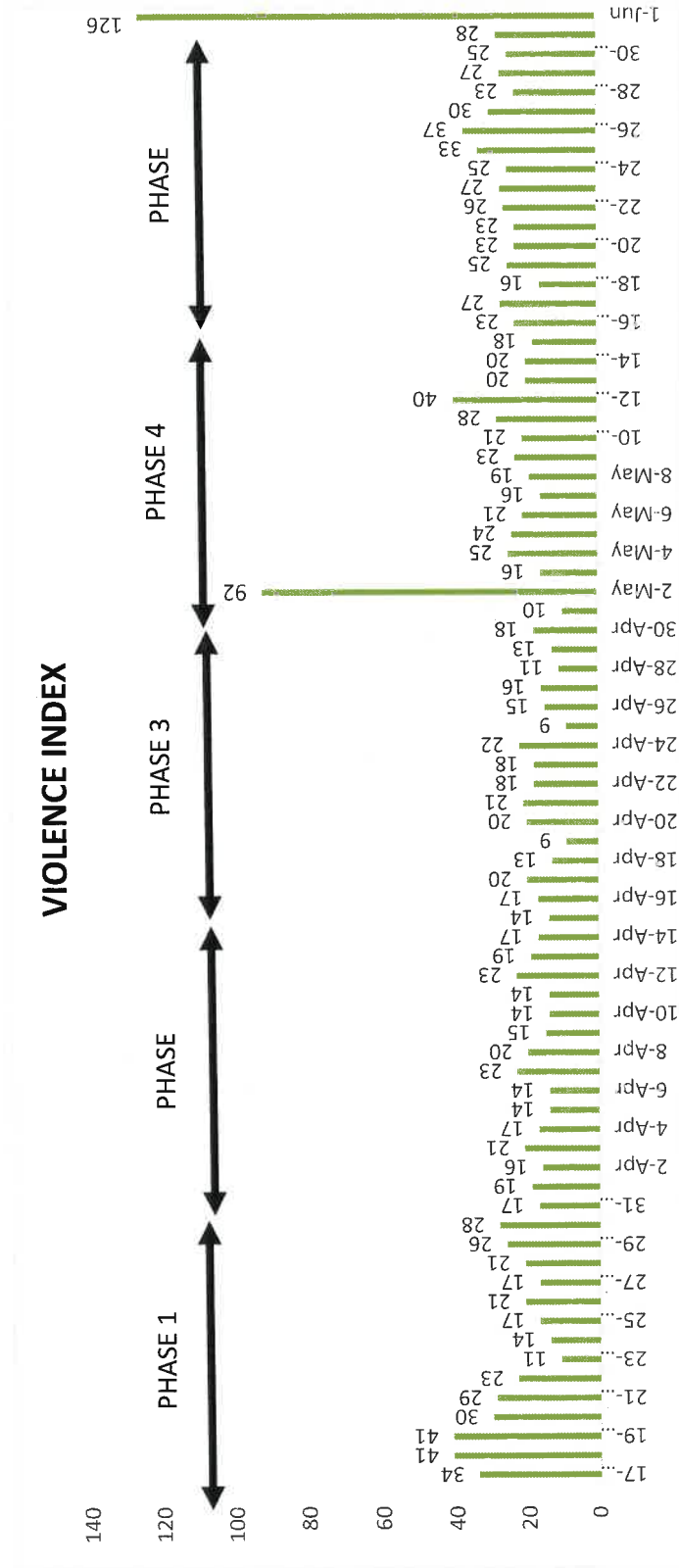
**CRIME INDEX**

**Figure 8: Overall Crime Index from 17 March 2020 – 1 Jun 2020**



Source: PDRM (2020)

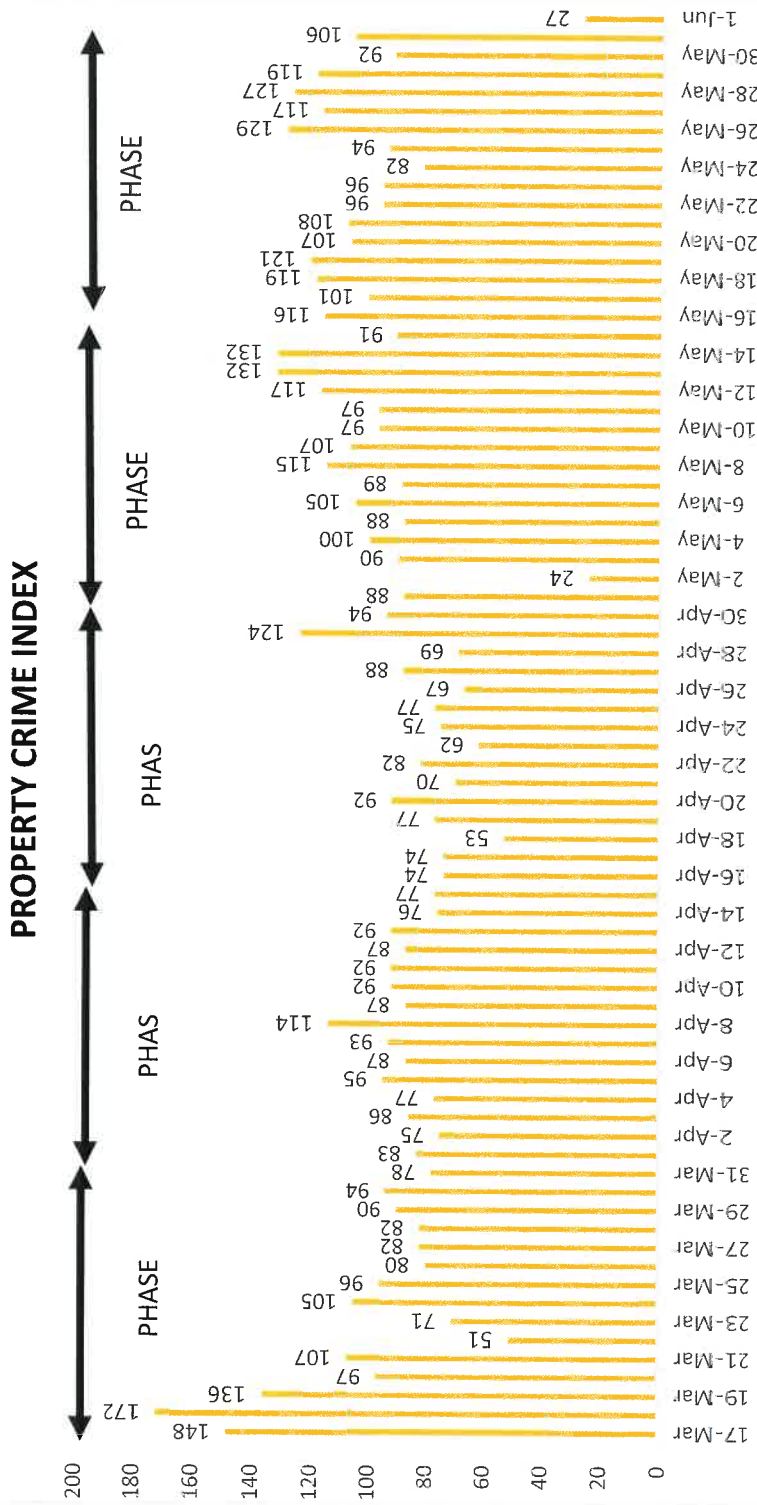
**Figure 9: Violence Index from 17 March 2020 – 1 Jun 2020**



Source: PDRM (2020)



Figure 10: Property Crime Index from 17 March 2020 – 1 Jun 2020



Source: PDRM (2020)

## 6. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Enforcement issues and challenges occurred at both domestic and international level. Local issues include fake news, cybercrime and drug trafficking whilst international challenges include the entry of illegal immigrants and sea infringement in waters boundaries. COVID-19 came along with rampant fake news in the social media especially on *Whatsapp*, *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Instagram*. Fake news was widely shared within the community which caused confusion and unnecessary fear. One of the remedies undertaken by PDRM is to elucidate issues and fake news using all available channels. MCO did not stop drug related crime. The distribution of drugs during MCO is disguised in the form of food delivery such as *Grab Food* or using *Grab Car*. Certain worshipped premises and entertainment outlets were still in operation despite warnings and advices given to those involved.

With the increase in online shopping, cybercrime became more predominant during the MCO period. A total of 771 cases of facemask fraud was reported between 18 March – 5 June 2020 with the highest number of cases through *Facebook* (529 cases or 68.61%), *WhatsApp* (108 cases or 14%) and others from websites and web-applications such as *mudah.my*, *WeChat*, *Instagram*, *Shopee*, *Carousell*, *Lazada* and *Lelong.com*. Crimes were committed by Chinese (395 cases or 51.23%), Malays (294 cases or 38.1%), Indians (25 cases or 3.24%) and others (56 cases or 7.26%).

On 17 April 2020, a group of undocumented migrants from Rohingya tried to land in Malaysia via vessels. On 8 June 2020, a group of 261 illegal immigrants from Rohingya landed in Pulau Langkawi by purposely damaging their boats. According to the National Task Force (NTF), a total of 369 illegal immigrants, 108 '*tekong*' (dealers) and 11 smugglers were detained (Berita Harian, 8 June 2020). This could severely undermine Malaysia's effort to curb the pandemic.

In April 2020, China's survey ship, Haiyang Dizhi 8 came to a '*standoff*' near Malaysia's West Capella, a Malaysian oil exploration vessel in Malaysia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) when the world was in the mid of

battling COVID-19 pandemic. The United States reacted by deploying a guided-missile cruiser, USS Bunker Hill (CG52) and an amphibious assault ship, *USS America (LHA-6)* to the Haiyang Dizhi 8 location. In early May 2020, an Independence-class littoral combat ship, *Littoral Combat Ship USS Montgomery (LCS 8)* and a dry cargo *USNS Cesar Chavez (T-AKE 14)* were sent to same location in support of Malaysia's oil exploration endeavours. The geopolitical tension between US and China not only spanned in the area of trade but manifested at sea. Malaysia reacted by exercising her rights under the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982. More challenges are expected in the near future and proactive measures must be devised.

## 7. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

The way Malaysia manoeuvres through COVID-19 pandemic marks the epitome of government, public servants, non-governmental organizations and segments of the society working together to protect the nation. Based on WHO standards, Malaysia remained at Stage 2, localized community transmission although in early September shows a relatively high proportion of new locally transmitted cases from *Sungai (Kedah)*, *Tawar (Kedah)* and *Benteng Lahad Datu (Sabah)* clusters. As the government began to consider reopening international borders to reboot the economy, risk assessment and testing requirements, quarantine and other alternative strategies need to be developed prior to allowing movements across borders. The government may consider the following recommendations:

- (i) The Malaysian government must stop new entries of refugees and any other illegal immigrants to curb the spread of COVID-19;
- (ii) Existing illegal immigrants and refugees for example the Rohingya should undergo '*whitening process*' and re-negotiate repatriation of refugees and illegal immigrants to other countries or specially designated locations;
- (iii) The Malaysian government must device '*natural deterrent*' factors to discourage new entries of illegal immigrants and refugees. Malaysia is currently seen as a potential escape avenue and possibly long-term settlement. In July 2019, the Ministry of Home Affairs had announced its

firm support to illegal immigrants who violated the 1959/63 Immigration Act (Act 155) to return to their country of origin on voluntary basis based on the rules and regulations of the Immigration Department. However, the response was relatively low due to push factors from their country of origin and easiness of getting illegal jobs and living in Malaysia; and

(iv) All foreigners entering Malaysia for all reasons spanning from holidays, work, medical tourism must have entry insurance or *takaful* upon entry to Malaysia from any registered insurance or *takaful* operators in Malaysia. The insurance and *takaful* will cover hospitalization and cost of sending back foreigners in the event of overstay, emergencies or criminal offenses. The Immigration Department must enforce mandatory insurance or *takaful* for foreigner workers.

Overall, Malaysia has been relatively successful in combating the COVID-19 pandemic due to her early intervention and close monitoring post -MCO exit strategy. Early recovery provides a competitive edge for Malaysia compared to Indonesia or the Philippines as economic recovery strategies could be implemented ahead of our counterparts. Coupled with effective economic policies for recovery and political stability, Malaysia would continue to chart economic growth.

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