



Home is Where the Heart Is: The Bruneian Context

By Hannah Ming Yit Ho

“It’s here,” announced one of my colleagues. The tone of finality in its measured delivery belied the onset of a national culture of vigilance. These words were tinged with anticipation of horror rather than joy. After months of having watched our neighboring countries get ravished, COVID-19 had now arrived on the shores of Negara Brunei Darussalam, self-hailed as *The Abode of Peace*, a nation with 5765 sq. km of land on the northeast coast of Borneo Island with a population of 459,500 (Department of Economic and Planning Statistics 2019)¹.

Even before the first positive case was declared, the Institute of Health Sciences at the national university where I work had taken the initiative to send out a pandemic preparation survey to staff and students alike. Behind the scenes, the Ministry of Health (MOH) was also working closely on national response plans that would be activated when an outbreak was eventually detected. For all intents and purposes, Negara Brunei Darussalam had prepared itself to deal with the unthinkable, which has since become a stubborn reality in our unassuming home.

¹ Department of Economic Planning and Statistics. 2019. “Population”. Ministry of Finance and Economy, Brunei Darussalam. Accessed on 9th May 2020. <<http://www.deps.gov.bn/SitePages/Population.aspx>>

Prior to COVID-19's arrival, the nation celebrated its 36th National Day with much pomp as Bruneians and representatives from various governmental and private institutions marched down Taman SOAS in the capital city, while the 29th Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah looked on with a healthy dose of pride. This traditional ritual is annually maintained in the Malay Islamic Monarchic sultanate every 23rd of February. Even amid reports of fast-rising SARS-CoV-2 numbers within the Southeast Asia region and the international world, Brunei Darussalam decided that it could safely conduct a gathering of over 26,000 people without cause for concern just yet.² MOH had given its approval with no known positive COVID-19 case within the nation to date.

An initial state of panic then arose on 9th March 2020, when MOH announced the nation's first confirmed COVID-19 case. Hereafter, daily press conferences were conducted by the Minister of Health, whose concern was visible as he reported on rapidly increasing positive numbers in subsequent days. His exemplary composure serves as a model to the public to continue weathering the storm that had arrived on Bruneian shores. A notable exception was when he was seen awash with emotion by double-digit positive cases that pose a threat to a small nation. An audible crack in his voice and lengthy pauses showed his human side, which would eventually come to endear him to the public and reveal his humane handling of the situation.

² Xinhua/Asian News Network. 2000. "Over 26,000 people attend Brunei's 36th National Day Celebrations." *The Star*. 23 February. Accessed on 9th May 2020.
<<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/regional/2020/02/23/over-26000-people-attend-brunei039s-36th-national-day-celebrations>>

Without mincing his words, our Minister-cum-National Chief of Health delivered a message of *penjarakan sosial* (social distancing) and maintenance of basic hygiene, including the twenty-second rule of hand-washing that continues as his talking point in Q&A sessions with the media. From early on, he created a buzzword that was soon converted into an IG hashtag: #dontpushit delivers an ultimatum while noting the limited capacity of our national health service. The public responded. Roads were emptied. The nation's workforce, which comprises government servants in huge numbers, worked from home. School holidays were brought forward. Gyms and cinemas were shuttered. Restaurants ran take-outs only. Amid a simmering social unease, public cooperation and support were gained through MOH's resounding mantras.

Significantly for this Malay Muslim sovereign nation, the Minister of Religious Affairs also announced that Friday prayers at mosques would be immediately cancelled nation-wide. With a cautious announcement of a phased re-opening of mosques to begin on 29th May 2020, he repeated the necessity to continue being attentive to MOH's message of pushing back against COVID-19 through public vigilance. With timely exchanges with medical experts, including at the World Health Organization, MOH continues to communicate the gravity of the unfolding situation to its local ministerial counterparts, as they work collaboratively for all round safety.

Mitigating the alarm that can easily escalate in a nation with a high social media penetration rate,³ MOH has successfully struck a balance between dispensing cautionary warnings and expressing a genuine concern for the people's welfare. Its note of transparency and equitable rhetoric have effectively cracked down on inflammatory messages that have gone viral. In one of his daily press briefings, the minister of health made clear that any form of discrimination, including that directed at racial minorities and foreign workers who are afflicted with the virus, would not be tolerated: "[COVID-19] has happened. Together we can [defeat this]. Nothing good is served in discriminating against those already affected. Let's pray for them instead."⁴ As displayed, MOH has led the rally for national unity and social harmony in tackling this ongoing pandemic. Through this calming voice of reason, a nation's anxiety has been offset.

Since day one, it is evident that Negara Brunei Darussalam will not gamble with the lives of those under its charge—citizens and residents alike. It has implemented neither a herd immunity approach taken up by European national counterparts nor a *laissez faire* attitude in its commitment to testing and contact tracing, which have been sticking points for its American national counterpart. In its conservatively cautious

³ Instagram users are the third highest in the world within Brunei Darussalam. See Azlan Othman. 2020. "Brunei Ranks High in Social Media Usage." *Borneo Bulletin*. 10 February. Accessed on 9th May 2020. <<https://borneobulletin.com.bn/bruneians-rank-high-social-media-usage/>>

⁴ In response to a question posed by a local press member, the Minister of Health Dato Seri Setia Dr Hj Mohd Isham Hj Jaafar asserted this equitable message. In his press briefings, he has also been seen praying for Allah's protection over the nation as Brunei experiences the Muslim holy month of Ramadhan until 1 Syawal 1441 Hijrah.

approach, Brunei's national strategy has worked to flatten the curve and time will tell whether it will enjoy similar success in dealing with subsequent waves. For now, there is much relief that we are keeping the infection contained, with 141 positive cases as of 23rd May 2020 and high testing rates for its population size.⁵ While life may never revert to an old normal, Bruneians are resilient and the nation is weathering through this pandemic in a united way, as the public continue to heed calls to stay at home (#teranahdirumah) for the benefit of all those who affectionately call Brunei their abode.

⁵ Ministry of Health. 2020. "Media Press Statement on COVID-19 in Brunei Darussalam on 8th May 2020, corresponding to 14 Ramadhan 1441 Hijrah." Brunei Darussalam. Accessed on 9th May 2020. <<https://healthresource-1258280810.cos.ap-singapore.myqcloud.com/e70522ea-9138-11ea-8bca-ee4353909644.pdf>>

