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Elections in the Midst of Covid-19: Impact on Public Health and Democracy

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Elections in the Midst of Covid-19: Impact on Public Health and Democracy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Covid-19 has necessitated adjustments in electoral processes. There are lessons to be learned from various countries on the management of elections during such times.
- In order to hold elections during a pandemic, governments have had to implement safety measures for everyone, including election officers, candidates, supporters, and to give special consideration to people undergoing Stay at Home notices.
- Political parties have turned to social media for political campaigning, increasing the public need for reliable and verifiable information that can be shared quickly, ethically and accurately.
- Emergency provisions unrelated to public health and which undermine fair and free electoral processes or place unnecessary restrictions on the mass media threaten constitutional principles and democracy.
- Ultimately, fair and safe elections can be held during this pandemic as long as there is cooperation, proper preparations and effective communication between the government and the people.

Introduction

At the time of writing, i.e. 21 September 2020, Covid-19 had infected 31 million people world-wide and claimed almost a million lives. About 23 million people have recovered and been discharged from hospitals while 7 million are still infected (Worldometers, n.d.a.). The actual number of cases is very likely to be much higher when under-recording and under-reporting are taken into account.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has issued many safety measure directives to governments. Admittedly, there was a lack of consensus among health professionals in the early days over the usefulness of face masks, what social distancing meant, as well as other standard operating procedures (SOPs) such as recording temperature and contact tracing. In recent months, however, international health guidelines have become more streamlined and standardised.

Despite the devastating impact of Covid-19, some governments have decided to continue with local, municipal, state or national elections. Some have justified it with the need to seek the people's mandate for continued governance and for approval to implement mitigating measures to cope with the recession. Others, despite having a lengthy grace period for upcoming elections, took advantage of the crisis to sway votes to their advantage. Regardless of the justifications for or against holding elections, Covid-19 has been deeply politicised in this regard.

This article explores public health and safety issues that arise from holding elections during a pandemic and assesses its impact on the people and electoral processes of the country. It discusses motivations and challenges and suggests alternatives that would better balance people's right to health and safety with democratic processes. The merits or demerits on electoral results are not discussed.

Elections: A Balancing Act

Elections are a crucial governance process in democratic societies. They are also public events for the airing and exchange of ideas and opinions about the way a country is run. Countries differ in the ways they interpret the workings of democracy.¹ As such, it is also argued to be "anti-democratic" (The Business Standard, 2020) to postpone elections.

Part of the argument against holding elections in a pandemic rests on exposing people to health risks and destabilising efforts to keep a lid on infections. Elections are often mass gatherings that see the involvement of many people – from candidates, campaign and support staff to supporters, election officers and voters. Campaigning and meet-and-greet sessions are especially conducive to the spread of diseases as large groups of supporters converge on a single location. Even with safety measures in place, social distancing might be momentarily forgotten and safety protocols breached. This risk is further deepened if the country already has a weak track record on containment of infections and enforcement of safety measures.

At the same time, the important role elections play in a democracy should not be downplayed. Elections provide the time and space for public discourse on a wide range of topics and invite citizens to be more knowledgeable and

¹ The main forms of democracy are: direct democracy, representative democracy, presidential democracy, parliamentary democracy, authoritarian democracy, participatory democracy, Islamic democracy and social democracy. For further reading, please go to the following links: <https://www.scienceabc.com/social-science/different-types-democracy-direct-representative-presidential-parliamentary.html>; <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/politics/different-forms-of-democracy-politics-essay.php>; https://www.jstor.org/stable/40981617?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A66913cdfff223083a07eef97bed1db15&seq=13#page_scan_tab_contents

informed about the policies and laws of the country. Discussions continue, sometimes intensely, at the dinner table, in coffee shops, street corners and on social media.

As such, the decision to hold elections during the Covid-19 pandemic is not reproachable per se, but the electoral processes need to be thorough in all public health safety procedures and strictly enforced. That said, the question of whether the credibility and legitimacy of a fair election can be preserved when held under such unusual and risky circumstances remains. Indeed, some elections held after the virus outbreak suffered from extremely low voter turnouts such as the primaries² in the United States (US). The state of Illinois had a low voter turnout as at that point in time, it had high infections and people were afraid and unenthusiastic about voting because of the risk to their health.(Corasaniti et al., 2020; Vesoulis, 2020). To mitigate the risks and encourage voting, some states offered postal voting and even drive-by services as alternatives.

Globally, at least 56 countries have held or were planning to hold national or local elections during the pandemic (International IDEA, 2020). Those who have supported holding elections generally believe that a mandate from the people is especially necessary for a government to handle critical situations such as the pandemic and to manage the ensuing economic recession.

Observations reveal an increase in Covid-19 infections post-elections; though it is important to note that this relationship is merely correlational at this point and does not imply causation. For example, Iran's Covid-19 cases surged after its February elections, Spain's quintupled four days after a political rally in March which led to a postponement of the local elections until July 12, and in the American state of Florida, its March primary elections resulted in two poll workers contracting Covid-19, one of whom had handled voters' driver's licenses for voter verification purposes (Alaei & Alaei, 2020; Kleinfeld & Kleinfeld, 2020). In Australia where voting is compulsory, low voter turnout – at 75% – was recorded at local elections held in Queensland on March 28. Some officers were concerned about the polling booths not being placed at a safe distance from each other. Covid-19 cases exceeded 490 on the eve of polling day (Horn & Zillman, 2020; McKenna Kate, 2020). France too had a lower turnout in its mid-March elections, as did Mali for its parliamentary elections held two weeks later (Belin & Nicolai, 2020).

On the other hand, about 111 countries postponed their elections⁴ after much lobbying against them by civil society (IFES, 2020a). For example, Chile postponed a national referendum slated for April 26 to late October amid growing concerns over the pandemic (Reuters, 2020). While some governments postponed elections ostensibly to prioritise the health and safety of their people, such a move may be for the government to retain and consolidate power. There are also cases where a postponement offered opportunities for the government to strengthen its hold on power, before they conduct elections despite Covid-19 still remaining a problem. Russia, for instance, whose postponed elections were heavily scrutinised by critics (IFES, 2020b), went into heavyweight elections on 1 July. People voted –remotely, by post or at the ballot box – approving major constitutional changes and endorsing Vladimir Putin as their President till 2036 (Nemenov, 2020). That week, the number of Russia's daily Covid-19 cases was around 6,500 (Worldometer. n.d.b). Israel held its elections on 4 March with safety procedures in place, and amid surging Covid-19 cases, have a few more elections set to take place(Jerusalem Post, 2020; BBC, 2020a).

Some governments take advantage of public fear and confusion to project themselves as a saviour against rising unemployment, food shortages and declining economies. For example, Hungary's parliament voted for far-right Prime Minister Viktor Orban to continue ruling to deal with the pandemic (Bayer, 2020). Since then, his

² The primaries are held in every state and territory of the US to select presidential candidates – one each from the Republicans and the Democrats.

⁴ For the full list of countries, please refer to https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/elections_postponed_due_to_covid-19.pdf

government has asserted control over an independent media website, leading to the resignations of 70 journalists in protest (BBC, 2020b).

That is not to say that every country that had postponed elections had done it for dishonorable reasons; there are historical precedents of countries more clearly delaying political processes for health and safety reasons. In 2018, the Democratic Republic of Congo delayed the presidential election because of the outbreak of the Ebola virus. In 2001 too, the United Kingdom (UK) general election was held off because of the spread of the hand, foot and mouth disease across the country. Taking a leaf out of their own book, the UK again, decided to postpone its May municipal elections for one year, thereby extending the tenure of the incumbent mayors. Other countries that have decided to delay elections over concerns of public health are Bolivia, Argentina, Nigeria and Zimbabwe as well as countries across the Western Balkans (James, 2020; IFES, 2020a).

In the following sections, we look at ways in which countries that have held elections during this pandemic have adapted their electoral processes to the demands of the situation.

The 2020 Singapore's General Election

Singapore's general election (GE) was held on July 10, 2020 with 192 candidates contesting in 31 constituencies. Between Nomination Day on June 30 and Polling Day on July 10, campaigning took place within eight busy days, with the final day being cooling-off day during which no campaigning was allowed. Although the constitutional deadline for holding the GE was April 14, 2021, the government decided to have elections in July 2020, notwithstanding the risks posed by the pandemic. In early May, the Parliamentary Elections (Covid-19 Special Arrangements) Bill was passed for special and temporary arrangements to be implemented so that elections could take place without public health being compromised (Tham, 2020). Critics postulated that in doing that, the government was using the crisis for its own benefits – an accusation that has been denied by the government (Ho, 2020).

To manage health risks, the Elections Department Singapore (ELD) put in place SOPs as per WHO guidelines, such as:

- having sanitising stations to administer temperature-taking of voters
- setting up distribution points at polling stations for disposable gloves and hand-sanitisers
- making it compulsory for face masks to be used by voters, polling and counting agents, as well as other officers involved
- isolating voters with temperatures above 37.5 degrees for Covid-19 testing
- social distancing with markers on the floor
- sanitising polling stations and equipment such as pens, ballot areas and boxes regularly
- ensuring that gloves are properly disposed of as voters leave the polling stations
- setting up separate polling booths for those with fevers and under non-Covid-19-positive quarantines and Stay Home Notices
- allocating specific voting time slots for vulnerable groups
- displaying educational materials relating to Covid-19 at all polling stations

Similar measures were adopted by other countries that had held their local, council, district or national elections earlier in the year—Taiwan on January 20, South Korea on April 15 and France on June 28 (The Diplomat, 2020; France 24, 2020a). Taiwan, which had received international praise for its containment efforts, pioneered safety measures for elections even before WHO's guidelines were issued. A report by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance found South Korea's electoral process and public health measures efficient,

and with a high voter turnout. Election results also indicate high voter confidence in the government and leadership (Spinelli, 2020).

In countries that had held successful elections, effective communication seems to have been the common denominator. This was something the ELD failed to achieve. The ELD, which is under the Prime Minister's Office, did not provide clear instructions in the lead-up to the election, and its website-based information was a challenge to navigate (ELD, n.d.a.). In its eagerness to ensure public health and safety, the ELD made adjustments to the polling process which caused confusion among voters, especially groups such as those in treatment for mild Covid-19 infections, those under quarantine or self-isolation, those with medical conditions, home-bound and immobile older persons, caregivers of young children and overseas voters. Government instructions on voting were subject to changes and at times seemed contradictory. On July 1, nine days before the GE, a notice was released to those under Stay Home Notices as well as those who were running a fever, giving them a specific hour to be at the polling stations to cast their vote (ELD, 2020a). Meanwhile, Covid-19 patients who were under Quarantine Orders were not allowed to vote and any violation could lead to them being charged under the law on infectious diseases, thus contradicting the law of mandatory voting and also depriving them of their chance to vote.

ELD did share its guidelines for campaigning under Covid-19. However, crowds made up of the press, security guards for ministers, police officers and safe distancing ambassadors still formed, some complying with the safe distancing rule and some not (ELD, 2020b). Social distancing was even harder to maintain when the Prime Minister, candidates of a hotly contested constituency, or charismatic candidates drew large crowds. Caught in the election fever, some would disregard safe distancing measures. Whenever safe distancing ambassadors stepped in to remind supporters and the candidate of an opposition party to practise safe distancing, he or she often had to face flak on the spot and on social media for being prejudicial against the party. Upon receiving the results of the election, celebrations broke out, especially in opposition-held wards and when all 93 Members of Parliament made "thank-you" visits to their constituencies.

The Singaporean government decided against postal voting or e-voting and decreed that all eligible voters living overseas had to register with a polling station to cast their votes. Globally, only ten polling stations were available, and despite Singapore's close diplomatic ties with and membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, none of them, including neighbouring Malaysia, had a polling station (ELD, 2020a). The Australian continent, where many Singaporeans are studying, working and residing had only one polling station in Canberra. On social media, some Singaporeans in Perth complained that they would not fly to Canberra when it was faster to fly to Singapore. The catch was that they would then have to undergo a 14-day quarantine in both countries respectively. There were also instances where the immigration department and the ELD did not communicate in time and left out the names of some overseas voters from the electoral registry at the overseas polling stations (Menon, 2020). A candidate, the secretary-general of a political party, returned as soon as possible from London once the writ-of-notice for elections was announced but was placed under the 14-day quarantine which limited his political campaign (Aziz, 2020).

On polling day the public health measures implemented included safe distancing, taking temperatures, wearing disposable hand gloves, sanitising hands, removing the face mask for identification, wearing the face mask again, disposing gloves and sanitising hands before leaving. The lengthy steps involved, especially putting on gloves and removing and re-wearing the face mask, slowed down the process so much that snaking queues of more than an hour began to form. Voters waited under the hot sun and some older persons experienced inconveniences such as having to use the restroom. By closing time there were voters who were still waiting for their turn and, so, in an unprecedented move, the ELD extended the closing time by two hours to 10pm. Post-election, the ELD issued a statement to apologise for a few issues which had surfaced during the voting process; the names of 13 voters who

were on Stay Home Notices were omitted from the electoral register while miscommunication between election officials cost a voter her chance to vote (Lim, 2020; Awang, 2020).

In Singapore, most of the outbreaks since February have been in government-approved migrant worker dormitories, in which more than 324,000 documented migrant workers live (CNA, 2020). This oversight of their crowded living conditions and the subsequent outbreaks shattered Singapore's sterling image in handling the pandemic. The Ministry of Health gives a daily report on numbers with information about the source of these cases. Below is a table which tracks the number of cases recorded from June 23, the day the announcement to hold the GE was made, until July 25, about 14 days after the GE.

Date	June 23	June 30	July 9	July 10	July 11	July 12	July 14	July 21-25
No. of Cases	119	246	125	322			347	513

Table 1: Number of infections reported on the days leading up to the GE and after the GE. (Todayonline, 2020; The Star, 2020; The Straits Times, 2020; MOH, 2020; Wong, 2020; Worldometer, n.d.b)

The Singaporean government's justification for the rising numbers was that fewer tests were being conducted over the public holiday and on the weekend of July 10 and 11; hence the increase was a result of the backlog of samples that were being cleared from July 12 (Gov, 2020). Minister Lawrence Wong who co-chairs the government's taskforce on Covid-19 also explained that the spike in cases was caused by the increase in testing and outreach into migrant worker communities who still form the bulk of infections. At the time of writing (July 31) the number of infections stands at 52,205, that is 9,158 per 1 million people (Worldometer, n.d.c.). These numbers are worrying as they include local transmissions and not just infections among migrant workers. Going by the incubation period of the virus, which is around 5 to 14 days, the actual figure of infections that occurred during this GE remains to be seen (Lauer et al., 2020).

In the past, the ELD had always managed the electoral process without a hitch, but the lapses in this GE2020 despite their efforts, has marred its otherwise unblemished record. Nevertheless, it is still commendable that the ELD responded to situations promptly and was quick to offer alternatives. The ELD acknowledged its missteps and will conduct investigations that will serve as lessons for the future.

Other Recent Elections

The precautions implemented in the Singaporean GE were also applied in the Malaysian by-election at Chini, in the state of Pahang. Its incumbent Member of Parliament (MP) Datuk Seri Abu Bakar Harun had suddenly passed away from a heart attack on May 7. Malaysia's Covid-19 containment efforts have been laudable. The SOPs for the by-election were similar to those adopted by Singapore, and also disallowed crowds and processions. Hence, campaigning was solely done through social media.

The Election Commission of Malaysia set up a total of 14 polling centres with 66 voting streams provided, including special streams for voters aged 60 and above as well as for those with disabilities. According to the 2019 Voter Registration updated as at May 7 this year, there were 20,990 registered voters with 56% of them aged 40 and below (Othman & Shahar, 2020). Health officers and 400 policemen had been deployed to manage the campaigning period and on polling day, 600 policemen were on duty (Malay Mail, 2020). Six individuals were found to be Covid-19 positive at the by-election and 98 individuals with high temperatures were ushered into

separate polling booths (Tang, 2020). As of now, no known case of infection from the by-election has surfaced. Inspired by the example set by the by-election in China, former Prime Minister Najib Razak urged his political party, UMNO, to increase its social media presence as a way to engage with the public (Choong, 2020).

The 21st General Election in South Korea was held on April 15 to elect 300 members for its National Assembly. The election had the highest voter turnout in 28 years and led to increased popularity for President Moon over the government's containment efforts (Bisbee, 2020; BBC, 2020c). Its election SOPs have since been adapted for use in a few other countries, including Singapore. South Korea even had wash basins placed at the entrances of some polling stations (Jeong & Martin, 2020). The government actively encouraged voter turnout by allowing postal voting, providing extra polling stations and encouraging advanced voting to reduce the number of voters at polling stations (ANFREL, 2020). Advanced voting proved a good incentive and saw the participation of more than 11 million voters or 27% of the overall number. Post-election, the government contact-traced voters who had tested positive for Covid-19 over the incubation period of 2 weeks (Ryuk, Oh & Sung, 2020). Most South Koreans were supportive of having the election and were pleased with the government's effort to ensure safety as a priority (McCurry & Kim, 2020; Low, 2020). In fact, no new Covid-19 infections were reported from the election apart from some imported cases (Cha, 2020). Nevertheless, the opposition party lamented that campaign rules restricted their reach, alluding to some degree of unfairness in the election.

In response to the Covid-19 crisis, France banned gatherings of more than 100 people, shut down schools and universities and closed all big sports events. President Emmanuel Macron announced that the municipal elections, whose campaigning had begun even before the onset of the pandemic, would take place on March 15. Authorities were ordered to keep queues as short as possible at polling booths. Voters were also allowed to vote by proxy (France 24, 2020a). Furthermore, older citizens and those of fragile health were encouraged to vote outside the peak periods of 10am to 2pm and 4pm to 6pm (RFI, 2020). However, despite these measures, almost 30% of voters at some polling stations did not vote due to concerns over Covid-19 (Williamson, 2020). The final voter turnout was only 45%, down by 20% from the 2014 election (France 24, 2020b). Young voters were found to be more likely to refrain from voting because of Covid-19, thus impacting parties that garner more support from the young such as the Greens and the far-left France Unbowed (France 24, 2020c). In the first week after the March election, Covid-19 infections on a seven-day average, went above 550 (The New York Times, 2020). Due to the subsequent rise in Covid-19 infections as well as the weak validation of the election through low voter turnout, the second round of local elections were pushed back by three months and held on June 28. The delayed elections resulted in the Greens and the far-left French parties taking a stronger hold (BBC, 2020d), in spite of the still low voter turnout (Sandford, 2020 & France 24, 2020d).

Other elections show management of safety measures in varying degrees of success (IFES, 2020b). Voter turnout can be seen as a rough indicator of how much the people trust their government in terms of both government containment effort of Covid-19 as well as in the institution of democracy in their country. Iran saw a low voter turnout of 42% in its February 2020 elections amid the coronavirus outbreak, a drop from the 60% in the 2016 election (International IDEA, 2020b). Croatia, with more than 50 Covid-19 cases per day, held its 10th parliamentary elections on July 5. Though corrupt and embroiled in scandals, the Croatian government managed to win, most probably due to its perceived smooth management of Covid-19 (Orovic & Kingsley, 2020). The 3.85 million voters made their choices among 2,669 candidates at 6,890 polling stations in the country; Covid-19 patients were allowed to vote by proxy. Also, 109 polling stations were set up in 41 countries for its 184,700 overseas voters (IFES, 2020c). Poland is another country that wanted to have its elections in May, despite heavy criticism for putting politics before public health. But that opportunism saw a "ghost election" being held in May with 0% voter turnout and polling stations remaining closed (Guardian, 2020). The subterfuge and the protest brought about two new rounds of elections, held on June 28 and July 9, and resulting in a nail-biting finish, its

slimmest victory (51.2 %) for a president since communism ended in 1989 (BBC, 2020e). Covid-19 numbers remained low in the country.

Despite forlorn conditions, war-torn Syria conducted its elections on 17 July to elect a 250-seat parliament from among 1,658 government-approved candidates. Bashar al-Assad continued as President to the country that has reportedly low Covid-19 infection rates. It had had more than 400,000 killed in wars, half of the population displaced, and five million refugees living in other countries (Euronews, 2020).

Postponed and Upcoming Elections

As the Covid-19 situation lingers with no end in sight, more elections in countries around the world will coincide with the pandemic. Sri Lanka postponed its elections to August 5 amid increasing Chinese influence on its politics and economics as well as personal political ambitions to entrench the Rajapaksa family as a dynasty. Meanwhile, to prepare for the US presidential election due in November, the Centre of Disease Control and Prevention and the Election Assistance Commission published a list of safety protocols and Covid-19 related state-specific resources for each state and the country (CDC, 2020; Resources, 2020). In order to encourage voting while the rates of infection in the US continue to soar, experts are recommending postal voting as was done in the five states of Washington, Colorado, Oregon, Utah and Hawai'i. President Trump, who had consistently denied the gravity of Covid-19 and insisted that the situation was under control, tweeted on July 30 that elections should be postponed until it could be done "properly, securely and safely" (BBC, 2020f). Apart from the fact that a postponement would require the Republican and Democratic party to agree on an issue (something of an anomaly), it would also seem that Trump's preference to delay the election has more to do with politics and personal gain than a genuine concern for the health and safety of his people. However, constitutionally and historically such a postponement has never happened (McKeever, 2020).

Although the next general election in Malaysia has been scheduled to be held in 2023, the political crisis in February 2020 which saw the overthrow of its democratically chosen government has resulted in much tension and division among the people. Malaysians who are dissatisfied with the unorthodox way the current ruling party has consolidated power, are demanding an election. More pointedly is the fact that the ruling party of Perikatan Nasional has only a 3-seat majority among 222 MPs and a Prime Minister who is in urgent need of a mandate (Zainuddin, 2020). Meanwhile Malaysians are set to witness a hotly-contested state election in Sabah where the campaigning shows much political maneuvering.

Conclusion

Elections are a way of empowering the people. Even where an authoritarian government is concerned, elections give people the idea that they have power and agency, however minute, to better standards of living for themselves and their families. In a democracy, leaders and representatives are tacitly agreeing to a commitment to justice, egalitarianism and upholding the rights of the people.

The tenacious and highly virulent nature of Covid-19 has been a huge challenge to governments and people around the world.

Elections, though risky in these times, give people the opportunity to continue supporting the government or entrust their well-being to another party that may better preserve their interests. Governments do feel they need

the people's mandate for major decisions ahead, to steer and stir the economy as well as ensure that people remain safe in this pandemic. In this regard, cooperation between the people and the government is essential for a successful election..

Based on observation, almost all countries which had conducted an election during the pandemic show an increase in infections in the incubation period of 14 days. Clearly, cooperation, confidence and preparation are needed for elections to be held safely and fairly.

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