



## THINK TANKS CALL FOR A CLEAR AND COORDINATED STRATEGY TO HELP CURB THE PANDEMIC

### JOINT STATEMENT

**2 JUNE 2021, KUALA LUMPUR:** We welcome the efforts of the government's vaccination acceleration, but further clarity and a clear strategy from Malaysia's leadership are urgently needed as the country undergoes another lockdown. The increasing trust deficit from the *rakyat* against the pandemic management is leading to the threat of instability, which does not augur well for the economic future of the country. The public healthcare system is at its breaking point with an alarming surge in COVID-19 cases, with frontline workers who are already overworked approaching a point of collapse. Half-hearted and contradictory movement control orders (MCOs) implemented over the past year have prolonged and deepened the crisis. Some members of the *rakyat* defy SOPs, risking others' lives - in part due to conflicting and confusing messages from our leaders. We, both the *rakyat* and the government, must all do better for the survival and future of our nation, starting now.

The government declared an Emergency on 12 January under the supposed objective of curbing the pandemic, yet daily cases continue to hit record highs. While we acknowledge the progress of the National Immunisation Programme (NIP) to date and the tremendous efforts of our healthcare frontline workers, we stress that greater efforts must be undertaken now. The government must come up with a holistic action plan and a clear exit strategy in combatting the pandemic. Specifically, we call on the government to:

## **1. Have a clear long-term pandemic management strategy with clarity in communication**

It is important to note that a lockdown strategy is not the only solution in addressing the pandemic. It is only supposed to be a preliminary strategy to give time and room for the health services to plan and expand their resources and services. This must be coupled with nationwide mass and frequent testing, and a systematic contact tracing system.

The 3 lockdown phases must be holistic and accurate in determining the severity of the pandemic. We recommend introducing an easy-to-understand COVID-19 severity index and the required public safety measures. As the severity index changes either by increasing or decreasing depending on the severity levels, the corresponding restrictions can be enhanced or relaxed accordingly. This more systematic approach would mean that decision-making would be data-driven, independent, and not arbitrary. The Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Defence (MinDef), and the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation (MOSTI) can collaborate with think-tanks to develop this.

In addition, the framework of the three phases should contain a communications component to convey the reasoning behind the implemented phases of MCO and their impact to the public. Clear and transparent communication can give more assurance and promote resilience amongst the *rakyat*.

## **2. Spend now to end the crisis and have a long-term fiscal plan to make this possible**

Lockdown measures only work when accompanied with holistic social and economic strategies. We welcome the latest RM40 billion PEMERKASA+ package recently unveiled. However, these measures remain reactive to events, and do not enable comprehensive responses against the crisis. An increase in government spending should also be accompanied with a long-term fiscal plan. We support the government's increase in borrowings to sustain such a plan.

## **3. Create a vertical surge in vaccinations**

We welcome the efforts in accelerating the vaccination process and introducing more PPVs to leverage private sector clinics and hospitals, but call for an increase of up to 300,000 target doses per day. The government must utilise vaccination centres of all sizes, not just mega-centres. There must be active outreach to all residents of Malaysia, not just the *rakyat*, to ensure mass acceptance irrespective of legal status. However, we caution against any form of cronyism in selecting companies providing vaccination services. Excessive profits made from vaccinations that have already been paid for through public funds should be discouraged.

There have been incidents of no-shows. To avoid wastage, a 'stand-by list system' should be made available for the vaccination programme managed by individual PPVs where people can be called in on short notice. A proper waiting list for the NIP must be adhered to without queue-jumping.

Further provisions of vaccine information and public education to encourage registrations should be made on a variety of platforms and not just limited to MySejahtera. This includes community and religious leaders, as well as emails, texts, and phone calls made to Malaysians nationwide with involvement of Telekom Malaysia Berhad.

#### **4. Deliver more clarity and government coordination**

There is a strong public perception that there is limited inter-ministerial and agency coordination in tackling the pandemic due to the constantly changing MCO levels and corresponding SOPs. The government needs to implement regulations consistently and fairly without being seen as being selective to help the *rakyat* understand needed behaviour changes to help tackle the pandemic.

The government must show a united and well-coordinated front to instil confidence in the *rakyat* that the government will look after their wellbeing. It must be made transparent which ministries are responsible for which decisions, and accountability must also be given to other ministries to support government plans. The federal government should also ensure dialogue takes place with state governments regularly. This not only shows accountability, but communicates to the public that any decision being made is being looked at from all areas of concern. By ensuring clarity and transparency, there will be less confusion and uncertainty amongst the *rakyat*.

#### **5. Reconvene Parliament immediately, whether physically or virtually**

We reiterate the calls made by civil society organisations and political leaders that Parliament must be reconvened in the immediate future; we believe it is constitutionally sound. The Yang Di-Pertuan Agong in February of this year had already stated that Parliament could be allowed to reconvene during the emergency period. In fact, with most if not all Members of Parliament having already been vaccinated, we see no reason why Parliament could not reconvene physically while adhering to the proper procedures. Reconvening Parliament will allow the country's leaders to set aside their political differences to address the most crucial public health crisis the country has faced in recent decades.

The sooner a multi-prong strategy is rolled out which addresses issues of clear government communication, effective pandemic management, coordination between government ministries and between federal and state governments, and rapid vaccination management, and finally ensures the necessary provision of economic aid, the sooner Malaysia can return to the serious business of economic recovery.

We also call upon the *rakyat* to assist the government in its efforts to curb the pandemic by implementing 'self lockdown' and register for vaccination. The burden of responsibility for the recovery of this country does not just fall on the shoulders of our leaders, but every one of us.

**Endorsements:**

1. Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) - Initiator
2. Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM)
3. Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (ASLI)
4. Bait Al-Amanah
5. CARI ASEAN Research and Advocacy
6. Center for Market Education (CME)
7. Centre for Governance and Political Studies (Cent-GPS)
8. Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS)
9. G25 Malaysia
10. Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy
11. IMAN Research
12. Institute for Leadership and Development Studies (LEAD)
13. Institut Nyala
14. Institute for Research and Development of Policy (IRDP)
15. Institute of Strategic Analysis & Policy Research (INSAP)
16. Institute of Electoral Studies & Advancement of Democracy (IESAD) Universiti Selangor
17. Institut Darul Ehsan (IDE)
18. Malaysian Health Coalition (MHC)
19. Penang Institute
20. Research for Social Advancement (REFSA)
21. Social & Economic Research Initiative (SERI)
22. WISDOM Foundation