

The numbers in Parliament? Here are other numbers that also matter

We have witnessed so much political drama over the last couple of weeks – from the abrupt suspension of the special sitting of Parliament in late July to Umno’s withdrawal of support for the Perikatan National government.

Now we wait for a vote of confidence in the prime minister, originally scheduled for the September sitting of Parliament. But now, with so many many calls for this to take place immediately, we might see an earlier sitting.

What will happen between now and the vote of confidence? Take a wild guess.

While the calls for the PM to step down are being made, people are busy trying to work out who has the magic majority number of at least 111 MPs to lead the country. Others are looking at the shifting alliances and the composition of the coalitions which may be formed to seize or maintain power.

While the maths is being done, remember too some other numbers and issues related to the health and economic crisis, as the outcome of the political crisis will have a direct bearing on them.

In early August, the country passed than 20,000 mark for new daily Covid infections, and the daily figures are now hovering around this.

The Ministry of Health estimates there are three undetected Covid cases for every reported infection.

The number of deaths is worrying: about 1,000 deaths a week, with 10% of these being those brought in dead. About 80% of those brought in dead were not diagnosed with Covid.

On 8 August, Malaysia passed the 300 mark for daily deaths, hitting a record high of 360 deaths.

While all the various frontline workers continue to be our champions, we hear about public hospitals bursting at the seams, private hospitals absorbing some of the Covid load and field hospitals being set up.

Many people are unable to get into hospitals for treatment due to a lack of bed space in some places. Frontline health workers are exhausted. Morgues are full of bodies, with 40-foot-long air-conditioned storage containers being made available in some places for extra space.

As of 9 August, just 26.9% of the population have received two doses of the vaccine while 48.3% of the population have received the first dose (statistics from Mysejahtera App).

The vaccination programme is on its way after a slow start, but we have not turned the corner on the pandemic yet. So, the announcement of the easing of the standard operating procedures for those who are fully vaccinated is a major cause for concern, as many, including the Malaysian Medical Association, have expressed.

Then we have the non-Covid-related illnesses and the countless numbers who are suffering with lack of or delayed treatment or access to medical care due to the closure of outpatient departments and the rechanneling of resources to battle the pandemic.

We have also seen a rise in mental health issues, with some reports suggesting a daily rate of three or four suicides across the country due to family problems, financial issues and emotional problems.

We know the pandemic has affected food and nutrition security. According to a Unicef policy paper entitled “Addressing Malaysia’s Nutrition Crisis post COVID-19”, some 9.8 million people or 30% of the Malaysian population are expected to suffer from food insecurity due to the Covid pandemic. What will be the impact on children?

With the pandemic came school closure. Online learning was touted as the way forward but what a struggle it has been for both teachers and students. One study has shown that 37% of children do not possess any digital device and only 15% of students have personal computers.

What happened to the plan to distribute laptops to students? How is digital disparity being addressed?

We know the lockdowns have led to many people experiencing a loss or reduction of wages and unemployment. According to the Department of Statistics, the unemployment rate in Malaysia rose to 4.8% in June 2021, involving 768,700 people.

In the recently released Household Income Estimates and Incidence of Poverty 2020 report, the Department of Statistics states that the majority of households experienced a fall in income and dropped to a lower-income group. An additional 12.5% of households fell into the category of those earning less than RM2,500 (the bottom 10%). That’s not all: 20% of households from the middle 40% group (incomes of RM4,850 – RM10,959) fell to the bottom 40% group. If these are the figures for 2020, what is happening to households in 2021?

Many of the gaps and problems – eg lack of proper social security measures for gig workers or the self-employed, low wages and low savings, the contract doctors situation and the underfunding of public healthcare – are not new issues but have worsened during the pandemic.

The pandemic has exposed the deep inadequacies in social protection policies and the inadequate funding and planning for the public healthcare system – basic but crucial social protection for the wellbeing of any nation.

The issues and numbers shared above are not an exhaustive list. The pandemic has hit vulnerable groups such as the homeless, the elderly, people living with HIV, people with disabilities, indigenous people, sexual and gender-based violence victims, the LGBT community, the stateless, migrant workers, and the refugee and asylum-seeking communities. How are their needs being assessed and met?

That the government has made efforts to tackle some of these issues is not in doubt. But such efforts apparently would not seem to be enough as can be seen from the white flag and other initiatives. Better targeting, information sharing and access to social protections are needed as the pandemic rages on.

Managing a pandemic does not come with a ready-made instruction manual but there is a basic expectation of the government of the day. It is simply this:

In our present political crisis, numbers will apparently decide the government of the day, in whatever form it takes (eg coalition, interim or what-have-you). What is important is that this government be made up of leaders who are sufficiently competent to manage the pandemic and lead the country out of this crisis into a recovery state.

The country is desperate for leaders of integrity committed to real reform on social protection – leaders who are able to think about, discuss and plan for the longer term. For example, they ought to implement a universal basic income or a basic pension scheme, bearing in mind that 71% of Employees Provident Fund contributors have less than RM50,000 in their savings.

The nation needs more research and data, discussion and debate on so many issues for real reform to happen. We sorely lack all this.

The country also needs leaders who understand at least the basics of a parliamentary democracy. They must have a healthy respect for fundamental liberties and human rights and be able to develop good governance.

Soon, the numbers will decide not only the outcome of the vote of confidence on the prime minister and possibly the government of the day but also how the health and economic crisis of the nation will be managed. Will we be able to move the country forward then? Our future depends on it.

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