

Editorial

COVID-19 and Southeast Asia

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Southeast Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal (SEAMJ) has stepped into its 20th year in 2020. SEAMJ is published biannually by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD). Its disciplinary focus encompasses the whole range of humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. SEAMJ is dedicated to advancing knowledge on a range of areas (such as English Language and Linguistics and Literature; Environmental Studies; Geography and Development; Historical and International Studies; Professional Communication and Sociology-Anthropology) that relate to the South East Asian region.

We are releasing the 20th Volume (Issue 1) of the SEAMJ amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic— a nightmarish milestone in the pandemic history (Ullah et al., 2021). The coronavirus, for far, has killed more than 2.6 million people across the world. In today's modern healthcare system, the toll that COVID-19 exacts is unimaginable. About 120,042,087 people have been infected (Worldometers, 2021). About 90 per cent of the international flights have been grounded, about 200 countries underwent either full or partial lockdown, millions of jobs were lost, which resulted in a shocking number of people falling into extreme poverty and facing serious threats to food security (Caballero-Anthony, 2021; Ullah et al., 2021).

Though the virus has not spread as rapidly in Southeast Asia as in other parts of the world, Southeast Asia (SEA) was not entirely spared. SEA was not out of the havoc the COVID-19 has inflicted on the world. As compared to the European, South and North American nations, SEA is handling the pandemic fairly well (World Bank, 2020). Along with the health, economic and political impact of COVID-19 in SEA could no way be flouted. However, the economy has been seriously impacted, with economic contraction averaging between 4% and 7% across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries (Caballero-Anthony, 2021).

Though southeast Asian countries have moved fast to apply technological measures (Ullah and Ho, 2020) to address and combat COVID-19 (United Nations, 2020) responses to the pandemic undertaken by individual ASEAN

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member countries were enormously diverse (Djalante et al, 2020). The deployment of these mitigation measures was instrumental in thwarting the spread of COVID-19. The measures ranged from strict lockdown conditions in the highly regulated city-state of Singapore to 'business as usual'. 'The Covid-19 management responses differs clearly between countries, ranging from ministerial level centralized responses (for example, Brunei, Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia) through to decentralized task forces (such as Indonesia and Lao DPR) that comprise public-private, private-societal and co-governance partnerships between medical service providers, government agencies, private and corporate financiers and civil society organizations (Djalante et al, 2020:7)'.

Southeast Asian healthcare sectors exhibit varying degrees of preparedness, and more than half of the subregion's countries are vulnerable because of weak health systems, including Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, the Philippines and Timor Leste (United Nations, 2020). However, some Southeast Asian countries have efficiently escaped the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Brunei Darussalam is one the best examples. The Brunei government effectively crafted a four-stage de-escalation plan with a budget allocation of BND15 million to meet viral outbreaks and emergencies (Hamdan and Case, 2021).

Hamdan and Case (2021) made an argument that Brunei benefitted during this pandemic by enclave economy and dispersed energy founts, which left the country less porous and densely urbanized than its other SEA countries. The relatively insulated and diffuse population has aided significantly in thwarting the transmission rate (Hamdan and Case, 2021; Ullah and Kumpoh, 2018).

As cases spiked around the world, Brunei responded most rapidly (Hayat, 2021) by ministerial communication with live events conducted daily on television and through social media, substantiated by round-the-clock hotline services for inquiries about COVID-19 (Hamdan and Case, 2021). The Ministry of Health swiftly embraced the regulations formulated by the World Health Organization, such as social distancing and self-isolation, as well as contact tracing through the BruHealth application to which some 90 per cent of citizens subscribed (Bodetti, 2020). Brunei has been able to reopen its economy much earlier than many countries afflicted with COVID-19.

The 20th Volume (Issue 1) of SEAMJ publishes five articles. The first one: Signs in the linguistic landscape as markers of an ethnic group's identity and ownership by *Paolo Coluzzi*, argue that the link between the land and the language/s spoken (or that used to be spoken) can only become visible through the linguistic landscape, which not only asserts identity and ownership but can also help to reinforce prestige and vitality of the languages employed.

The second article: A comparative study on motivation in foreign language learning in Brunei and Malaysian Universities by *Farhana Amirah Pg Redzuan*,

is a critical analysis of past studies by Ainol and Isarji's (2009) on foreign language learners at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), and Farhana's (2019) study on Universiti Brunei Darussalam's (UBD) foreign language learners' motivation. The third article: Rohingya Refugee Response Encircling South Asian Geo-politics: Debriefing India's Stance from Bangladesh Perspective by *Santa Islam*, presents an analysis on one of the most pressing issues in the world is the geopolitical aspects of diplomatic divergences between India and Bangladesh regarding the Rohingya population. The fourth article: The Grateful migrants: Indians and Bangladeshis in Singapore in times of COVID-19 by *Diotima Chatteraj*, investigates how varied ways COVID-19 has impacted the lives of the migrant workers in Singapore and highlights the migrant workers' belief if Singapore's effort has been enough for them during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fifth article: Administrative Reforms in South and Southeast Asia: Enhancing the Capacity for Public Service Delivery by *Muhammad Azizuddin*, aims at looking into the administrative reform—a special public policy instrument of governments—is to improve the capacity of public service delivery systems in South and Southeast Asia.

SEAMJ has released a 'call for paper' for a special issue on COVID-19 and Southeast Asia. The Coronavirus Disease Outbreak-2019 (COVID-19) has had a far-ranging global impact. Southeast Asia is no exception. The impact of COVID-19 on this region has had a direct effect on its economy. The diversity of the region has posed serious issues of human security on a massive scale, resulting in a stagnation of economy, mobility, trade and human relation. This special issue welcomes all perspectives on this topic through articles grounded in original first-hand empirical research—be it on the basis of (online) texts or actual fieldwork—that fall under social science or humanities research, and that consider the social, economic, cultural and/or political impact of this unprecedented crisis on Southeast Asian societies. Papers (5,000 to 7,000 words) along with abstracts (150 words) are to be sent to Chief Editor: seamj@ubd.edu.bn by 15th of August 2021. We are expecting to have this special issue published at the end of 2021.

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