

2022 is about building a 'better Malaysia'

It is normal for people the world over to anticipate the new year with a fresh start.

However, the emergence of new Covid-19 variants such as Deltacron – a combination of the Delta and Omicron variants – and Florona (contracting Covid-19 and Influenza) in some parts of the world, has triggered new rounds of uncertainty.

Although it could be less deadly, research reveals that the Omicron variant is about two to three times more transmissible than Delta, at the very least.

As of Jan 6, Malaysia detected 245 Omicron cases, of which 233 were imported cases and the remaining 12 belonged to local transmissions, 157 cases involved umrah pilgrims.

To curb the spread of Omicron, Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin immediately introduced a temporary suspension of umrah travel to Saudi Arabia, with effect from Jan 8.

Additionally, sales for flight and bus tickets between Singapore and Malaysia were put on hold from Dec 23, 2021 to Jan 20, 2022 – weighing down on any glimmer of hope among airline and bus operators who were keen to recover from the economic losses of the pandemic.

This also means that many Malaysians in the island republic could not reunite with their families back home for the upcoming Chinese New Year (CNY) celebration in February.

New variants such as Deltacron and Florona continue to pose serious uncertainties among hard-hit sectors such as hospitality and tourism.

There is still a possibility of the resumption of stringent travel restrictions and tightened Covid-19 testing rules, full border closures and extensive quarantine measures in certain countries in 2022.

Notwithstanding, the current administration is trying to accelerate the rollout of booster shots by shortening the interval for receiving Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccinations from six to only three months.

However, it might not be sustainable in the long run. Whenever there are new virus variants, citizens might have to take booster shots at least twice a year to protect themselves against Covid-19.

Nevertheless, some citizens chose not to receive booster shots as they worry that frequent vaccinations within short intervals would overload their immune systems.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) cautioned recently that repeating booster doses every four months might eventually lead to fatigue in the population.

Furthermore, Fitch Solutions Country Risk & Industry Research revealed on Jan 12 that both retail sales and consumer confidence indices were still struggling to resume back to the pre-pandemic levels.

Comparing January and September 2021 to the same period of 2019, retail sales remained at 1.2 per cent while rising consumer price inflation would potentially erode purchasing power among Malaysians, leading to a drastic drop in consumer spending.

Such a scenario is already reflected in Malaysia's annual inflation rate – from 2.9 per cent in October to 3.3 per cent in November 2021.

As mentioned in an EMIR Research article, as operating costs ranging from salaries of employees, rent and utility charges become relatively higher than before, coffee shop owners and small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) owners, in general, are not motivated to hire local workers under the current climate.

Continuous rising cost of ingredients and operating costs have left coffee shop owners with no other alternative but to increase the price of beverages by up to 60 sen from the beginning of the year.

Some restaurants and food stalls also shrank their serving portions with fewer ingredients.

As more money is required to spend on essential items (i.e., food, water, transport and shelter), the hardcore poor and B40 households in the urban areas, in particular, would find it difficult to cope with rising living costs.

The **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)** revealed that the number of unemployed in November 2021 has reduced to below 700,000 persons for the first time – the lowest since April 2020.

Nonetheless, DOSM's definition of employed persons includes those working just one hour a week and who may be unpaid workers in a family enterprise/setting (time-related).

The problem of underemployment also comes in whereby some of them had to work in low-skilled, low-income jobs that do not match their qualifications (skills-related).

Hence, it is still too early to say whether Malaysia could achieve economic growth of between 5.5 and 6.5 per cent in 2022, based on the Ministry of Finance's projection.

While ordinary citizens and small business owners are finding ways to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, society also has to deal with unexpected losses from environmental disasters.

From the deadly incidents such as that which occurred in the Tambun landslide, floods in the Yan district and the devastating flooding in eight states, the adverse effects of climate change – more extreme weather patterns than usual – are becoming more real and concerning.

The flash floods in Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Perak, Negri Sembilan, Melaka, Kuala Lumpur and Selangor that occurred in mid-December last year have devastated homes, vehicles, livestock, farms, farming, equipment, etc. and with that comes the financial losses and worries.

As such, residents who were left with flood-damaged houses, vehicles, furniture and electrical appliances were rendered helpless from the double whammy of the on-going Covid-19 crisis affecting livelihoods and the flood disaster.

Yet, a rather lacklustre attitude from the current administration had slowed down the momentum of the search and rescue mission. The government was accused of not activating relief efforts immediately.

Then, there's the speculation about the upcoming 15th general election (GE15) – which could happen either before or after the end of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) period in July 2022.

It is arguable that the voting behaviour of new voters, particularly those from the Undi18 bloc (i.e., age 18 to 20) during GE15, cannot be pre-determined.

An additional 5.8 million voters will enter the electoral scene. Out of the 5.8 million new voters, approximately 1.2 million are from the Undi18 bloc, while the rest are 21 years old and above.

But, the rakyat need not despair as 2022 should be seen as a crucial year for them to fulfil their civic duty by voting in candidates who could deliver constituency work, transforming their lives for the better.

2022 is also the year that perhaps we can optimistically look forward to the brand new politics of hope that would usher in a "Better Malaysia".

<https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2022/01/763998/2022-about-building-better-malaysia>