

## **Leadership Lessons from New Zealand's approach to COVID-19 Pandemic; Reflections for Malaysia**

**By: Ezuan Ashraf Zulkifly, Senior Research Associate, Razak School of Government**

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COVID-19 cases emerged in New Zealand quite later than in the rest of the world. By being an island nation and having a low-density population, New Zealand's partial isolation meant that it had the time to observe the overwhelming impact of the pandemic, especially when it swept through Italy.

In learning from New Zealand's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic under Jacinda Arden's leadership, we can explore and highlight how politics, personality traits, demographic differences, and policies affect the response of COVID-19 pandemic in a particular country. New Zealand has successfully stopped COVID-19 infections twice, in May and October of 2020, and in between these five months, the country reported more than 100-days of zero COVID-19 cases.

Malaysia was also in a similar situation to New Zealand and took early intervention, such as introducing the Movement Control Order (MCO) to stop the spread of the virus. However, the changing political landscape and its continuous turbulence when COVID-19 was rapidly spreading across the region have severely affected many initiatives to curtail the pandemic.

In our current situation, where political stability is beyond our control, we need to maximise other efforts to ensure that the country can still win against the pandemic.

As a society, we have learned several key lessons in managing ourselves and others during this pandemic, and the situation has brought out the leadership qualities in many people. Leadership in the pandemic appears to involve leading with a clear purpose, intending to minimise harm to society and the economy as much as possible.

Strategies taken up by successful countries, like New Zealand in combating the COVID-19 pandemic should be studied and adopted to improve our approach.

### ***Listening to subject matter experts and relying on scientific data to make informed decisions***

The New Zealand government has shown how their approach to listening and trusting public health experts' advice has given them the upper hand in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The policy decisions made were not only quick but supported by evidence-based scientific data. All this was due to the engagement and willingness to listen to public health experts in the country. Professor Michael Baker, from Otago University's Public Health Department, and one of the experts advising the Arden-led government, has said that "science and leadership have to go together" for the pandemic response to be effective.

In Malaysia, although some experts do work with the government to mitigate issues related to the pandemic, it would be excellent if we can get more subject matter experts, backed up by scientific data, to contribute. They should be trusted in providing their service to the country, be it in improving the healthcare sector, economy, society or any other relevant aspects.

## ***Effective communication and engagement as a mechanism for crisis management and systemic solutions***

The New Zealand government's communication and engagement with the public and inter-ministerial have proven very effective and successful in mitigating the crisis. The two-way communication creates passion and effort, which ultimately binds those involved to a sense of shared prosperity. It also helps to ensure a successful formulation and execution of policies and continued strong support from all groups and levels in the country.

During the early days of the pandemic, Jacinda Arden's inter-ministerial engagement has shown to be very proactive. Her first major policy decision was to impose a travel ban on China in early February of 2020 alongside aid packages for the tourism and export industry, even though New Zealand had yet to have any confirmed cases at that time. In the following months, the New Zealand government conducted open dialogues with businesses, union leaders and banks to develop initiatives and mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in aid support of NZD 12.1 billion for the New Zealanders.

Jacinda Arden's leadership skills did not only deepen engagement and rapid decision-making, but her use of communication strategies throughout the pandemic as well was very efficient. The critical points in Arden's messages were promoting unity in fighting the pandemic. The content was always clear and consistent, and it touched many people on an emotional level, which showed how genuine and authentic she really was. She attended press conferences alongside other political leaders and public health experts and made use of social media to obtain unfiltered feedback from the public. Her common choice of platform was Facebook Live, where she would unofficially update the public on the government's responses and even opened a Q&A session for the viewers.

The lessons from New Zealand are indisputable. The ability of its leaders to act strategically with full of empathy and transparency in driving the country out of the crisis has shown us we will see the light at the end of the tunnel if we work together towards a common purpose.

Nevertheless, Malaysia does have its advantage in the fight against COVID-19. All of us must agree that the Malaysian public healthcare infrastructure and the 'frontliners' are as good, if not better, than New Zealand in managing the COVID-19 outbreak. We were better prepared for situations like this as we had prior experience dealing with MERS and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus outbreak in 2003-2004.

Our achievement in speeding up the vaccination rate to about 500,000 doses per day, with more than 23% of the population fully vaccinated as of 3rd August 2021, should be applauded. The target to lower the infectivity rate of COVID-19 via 'herd immunity' now looks promising for Malaysia.

Malaysia is not a failed state and will never be one if we work together during times of crises. Let us reflect again on the appeal by Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, the Director-General of Health Malaysia, for us to come together and fight a common enemy, the COVID-19. Let us not be divided when the war has yet to be won. Neither have we lost. All Malaysians must rally together to do their part!