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Response of ASEAN member states to the spread of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia

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Abstract. This paper aims to highlight the response of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) towards COVID-19. COVID-19, which is known as the Novel Coronavirus originally from Wuhan, a city in China and has been spreading to more than 200 countries in the world within a very short time. World Health Organization (WHO) asserts that COVID-19 has been a global pandemic. It has reached out to all continents in the world. Using primary and secondary resources, this paper argues that ASEAN has significantly responded at the regional level to mitigate the pandemic. At the national level, ASEAN member states have responded it with different policies based on their domestic socio-economic, security, and political circumstances. Singapore, Philippines, and Malaysia are the countries with the highest cases of COVID-19 implementing a lockdown policy. Thailand and Indonesia apply a local lockdown policy. While Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia implement social distancing policies to protect their citizens from COVID-19. As a result, Vietnam and Malaysia succeed in suppressing the growth of COVID-19 cases. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 cases in Singapore and Indonesia, despite the government efforts to stop its spread, continue to increase as of June 2020.

Keywords: *COVID-19, ASEAN, domestic policy, security, politics, economy*

1. Introduction

In early 2020, the world was shocked by the spread of the COVID-19 or the novel coronavirus that killed thousands of people worldwide. This virus was originated from Hubei City, Wuhan China, in November 2019. The Chinese government has not yet given the name of the virus. The number of deaths continues to increase. At the end of December 2019, deaths in Hubei reached 60 people and infected with the virus up to 180 people. World Health Organization (WHO) asserted that this virus emerged on 8 December 2019 and spread rapidly to all regions worldwide [1]. In the Middle East, Covid-19 spread widely in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Iran is the country with the largest number of infected with this virus. The Saudis decided to close the Hajj from around the world and close down other important cities for tourists to visit. However, the tourism sector, including the pilgrimage, is considered as Saudi Arabia's biggest income after oil [2]. This virus continues to spread to Europe, such as Italy, Britain, Canada, Germany, and others. WHO declared this virus as a pandemic [2].



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This pandemic does not only affect developed countries, but this virus also occurs in ASEAN. The largest number infected with COVID-19 are Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, and Malaysia. In comparison, the smallest number of infected with COVID-19 were Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei Darussalam. Based on data in March 2020, Malaysia's cases reached up to 1,183, Indonesian cases were at 2,092, and the Philippines' cases were slightly higher at 2,311 [3]. At the same time, COVID-19 positive cases in Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei were lower, respectively, with 8 cases, 109 cases, and 120 cases. The total number of COVID-19 infected cases from all ASEAN countries reached 10,070 in March 2020 [4].

This paper aims to highlight the response of ASEAN and its members to the spread of COVID-19 at the regional and respective national levels. This paper has used primary and secondary data that are available online from various institutions and national agencies in Southeast Asia and beyond. Finally, it discusses the different responses of ASEAN member states to the global pandemic.

2. Methods

The paper is qualitative and relies on both primary and secondary sources of data collection. Primary data refers to an original data source such as government's report used by the researcher to support the arguments [5]. On the other hand, secondary data sources are "preexisting data that have been collected or used for a different purpose or by other authors other than the researcher. These data may have been gathered originally for another research or administrative purposes" [6].

As for data analysis, the researcher applies thematic analysis to assist in the qualitative analysis of data. By utilizing this method of data analysis, the researcher will gain insight and knowledge on the response of ASEAN as a regional initiative to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the data gathered through the national reports from ASEAN member states as secondary sources will also be analyzed and interpreted to enable the author to identify the response of ASEAN member states in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia.

3. Result and discussions

As a regional organization, ASEAN has taken several steps to stop the spread of the Covid-19 and anticipate its impacts. However, the significant response has been implemented at the national level. The national government of the ASEAN member states applies national measures to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak according to their respective national interests. They want to maintain security, political stability that will impact their country's economy and, consequently, the ASEAN economy as a whole. Here are the responses of ASEAN in the regional level and ASEAN member states' response to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

3.1 Regional response

At the regional level, ASEAN Foreign Ministers conducted a meeting to mitigate the pandemic. One of the most remarkable about this meeting was the meeting was conducted online, and attended by ASEAN health experts and officials of ASEAN member countries (AMS) and China. The meeting was held via a special video conference to discuss further cooperation areas in responding to COVID-19. Through the Chair of the ASEAN Senior Health Official, the ASEAN Health Sector, currently led by Indonesia, presented the progress of ASEAN's response to COVID-19 since the outbreak began. Participants from each country exchanged technical data about COVID-19 and shared updates and experiences in testing and maintenance. A representative from the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention discussed the epidemiology and geographical distribution of COVID-19 in China. He also shared technical insights about the dynamics of transmission, history of victims of disease, virology, modes of transmission and transmission, detention strategies, contact management, and treatment of cases. Coordination from each ASEAN member country is needed to complete COVID-19 in ASEAN. Each AMS presented a status update on COVID-19 that focused on prevention, early detection, mitigation, and response interventions, including improving contact and surveillance trackers, case management,

reducing the flow of people and limiting import cases, social distance, and public involvement and cooperation to prevent transmission [7].

Besides AMS from health experts, the ASEAN ministerial meeting also focused on the fate of the ASEAN market. ASEAN remains committed to managing the ASEAN market for international trade and investment and strengthening regional information, coordination, and collaboration in responding to the economic challenges caused by Covid-19. Every government in the Southeast Asian Region must continue to instill trust for investors and tourist destinations by using technology and digital trade, especially for the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises sector (MSME). ASEAN also ensures each country to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of long-term supply chains through transparency and better diversification, in particular the implementation of MPAC 2025. It is to increase ASEAN economic cooperation with external partners aiming at strengthening regional supply chains so that they are more resilient to internal and external shocks. The ASEAN Foreign Minister meeting also hopes that each country refrains from actions that can create unnecessary inflationary pressures or adversely affecting food security in ASEAN. It is also to ensure the availability of basic goods and commodities, overcome non-tariff barriers, especially those that hamper the smooth flow of goods and services in the supply chain, and refrain from implementing new and unnecessary non-tariff measures [8].

3.2. National level response

ASEAN member states have different responses to the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. At least, there are three different policies taken by ASEAN member states.

3.2.1. National lockdown among all ASEAN member countries

There are only two countries that dare to impose national lockdown: Malaysia and the Philippines. From the perspective of International Relations Studies, ASEAN countries have different policies in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Malaysia and the Philippines choose a national lockdown. Malaysia started lockdown on 18 March 2020, when COVID-19 had not spread significantly in its territories. All transactions and business places were closed. Even Mosques as places of worship for Malaysian Muslim citizens were closed, including Friday prayers [9]. The Malaysian government asked the Mosque Committee to clean and disinfect all Mosques in Malaysia to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. This policy is the first policy of the new government of Muhyiddin Yassin, newly appointed Prime Minister by the Supreme Head of the King in the early March 2020. Muhyiddin Yassin's lockdown policy is very firm compared to other ASEAN countries that have not issued any policies, including Indonesia at that time.

The Philippines conducted a national lockdown earlier than Malaysia on 15 March 2020. Duterte mobilized the police and military for public order during the national lockdown. Unfortunately, this decision was not accompanied by adequate preparation from the Philippine government. The Philippine government did not issue a financial assistance policy for people in poor cities like San Roque. The population of the city reached 6000 families, and the majority only earned around US\$ 10.52. They were panic by the decision of President Duterte [10].

3.2.2. Local city lockdown

The government implemented local lockdown by instructing their people to work from home (WFH). Singapore is one of ASEAN member countries with the best economic growth in Southeast Asia. However, since 2019 Singapore experienced bad economic growth with 0.7 percent, which fell sharply from 3.4 percent in 2018. Being good in the business infrastructure and the service sectors was the main pillars of Singapore's economic growth. Pressures of electronic declining demand and US-China trade tensions resulted in the manufacturing sector contracting down to -2.3 percent from -0.7 percent. Singapore's economy had been extremely affected by the COVID-19. The country adopted a local lockdown policy to stop the pandemic and aimed at recovering the economic activities to stabilize economic growth.

Similarly, Thailand did not implement the policy of national lockdown but issued a local lockdown policy. Before the COVID-19, Thailand's economy was disrupted. The performance of the Thailand economy was held back by the uncertainty of American-Chinese trade, weakening domestic demand, delays in government budgets, and the long drought causing their agricultural products to decline sharply. The economic slowdown in the final quarter of 2019 made the economic performance in 2019 drop dramatically to 2.4 percent compared to 4.2 percent in 2018. Thai investment slowed down 0.9 percent from 2.7 percent, import-export trade activity contracted. With the economic downturn in 2019, Thailand only recorded a growth of 2.4 percent during 2019 compared to 4.1 percent in 2018, the lowest in five years.

3.2.3. *Rapid test and social distancing*

The countries with a small number of the COVID-19 cases opted to do a rapid test and social distancing. In the case of Laos and Myanmar, which have territorial borders with China along 2000 kilometers, they have a small number of infected pandemic cases. Cambodia and Vietnam, which have close cultural and commercial links with China, have reported only 104 cases and 169 cases respectively. In fact, as of today, Vietnam has been declared clear from the pandemic case. However, health consultant experts and former epidemiologists from the Thailand Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) doubt the reports from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam [11]. Although the number of cases in Cambodia is small, the Cambodian government has implemented a rapid test to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This test only takes about two hours to determine whether someone is infected with the virus or not [12].

Indonesia has decided to take a rapid test for limited and targeted people to stop the spread of the pandemic and restrict mass movement with accordance with social distancing policy and requested people to follow the protocol of COVID-19 based on social distancing at the larger scale, known as *Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar* (PSBB). The first province to implement PSBB is Jakarta. On 22 April 2020, PSBB was followed by the province of West Sumatra. In addition to the two provinces, 16 cities in all over Indonesia have implemented PSBB. Among these cities are Bogor, Bekasi, Depok, Bandung City, Cimahi, Bandung Barat, and Sumedang [13]. President Joko Widodo was considered being very hesitant and late in issuing instruction on PSBB. The Indonesian government stressed that economic factors were the consideration of why the government was slow to implement PSBB and also did not dare to implement lockdown policy [14].

The decision of several ASEAN countries to implement the rapid test, local lockdown, and social distancing is due to various considerations at domestic circumstances. For example, Indonesia President Joko Widodo has opted the rapid test and social distancing policies before issuing PSBB policy in just a few cities, not all Indonesia, to avoid economic failure. The government hopes that the economic activities of the Indonesian people will continue to run as usual during the pandemic [15]. According to Damuri (2020), in CSIS Commentaries explained, lockdown will prevent the spread of the virus from outside to inside areas. However, if the virus is already in a city or a country, the lockdown policy will be ineffective other than just reducing the spread to other areas. Italy began lockdown at the end of February 2020 in Lombardi, which was the most severely affected by COVID-19. However, it was not a solution. Even when the national lockdown was implemented, the number of new cases continued to increase. In national restrictions applied on 9 March 2020, the number of new cases actually increased to 15 thousand, three times more than before the national lockdown [15].

If Indonesia and the ASEAN countries implement a lockdown policy, it will disrupt the domestic political stability of the country. Lockdown and without lockdown, the number of cases due to COVID-19 continues to increase. Based on the CSIS chart processed by WHO, in Italy, Indonesia, and Germany, there has been an increase in COVID-19 cases all the time. One of the problems with this lockdown is to ensure the speediness of food supplies and other needs. In Jakarta, for example, all people entirely depend on outside regional economy supply. If the lockdown is implemented, prices will rise, and scarcity will occur in the market and trigger social unrest. Without lockdown, in Jakarta, the prices of basic food items have started to rise, such as rice. Sugar has also increased to 16 percent. Similarly, other goods and products such as eggs and chicken meat have gradually increased [16].

Indonesia learns from China's policy on local lockdown policy in Wuhan, China. Indeed, the reduction in the number of COVID-19 cases has succeeded, but the economic and social costs incurred by the Chinese government are very high. The Economist Magazine writes, many small and medium businesses in the province fall and have difficulty in regaining their businesses again. The lockdown will have an extraordinary economic effect. Technology, namely business through digital, is not enough to help the economies of Indonesia and other ASEAN member countries because 80 percent of work activities are carried out in real terms and face-to-face transactions.

Damuri (2020) assumed that around 50 percent of the activities of economic agents and workers were stopped with an equivalent of 30 percent of the national economy in Jakarta. Using economic balance, it could be simulated that a reduction of 30 percent of the national economic worker activities would result in a decrease of almost 12 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). If this lasts for two weeks, Indonesia's annual GDP will decrease to 0.5 percent and one percent if it lasts for one month. In the form of a figure, it only sees one percent in the equivalent of losing IDR 75 trillion, almost the same as the Jakarta APBD in 2020 reaching IDR 88 trillion. It is quite heavy for Indonesia [17].

Financial markets will respond negatively, which results in an economic downturn. The economy that falls due to COVID-19 will cause great psychological pressure, especially for the lower middle class and chaos in the country. Then, political stability becomes threatened, which results in the collapse of the Indonesia government. However, Chatib Basri, Indonesian economist and former Indonesian Finance Minister in his observation, explained that social distancing would impact the country's economy without good preparation. People who have money will have difficulty to shop except online shopping. However, the amount will not be significant, panic buying will occur, basic needs such as foods and other goods will be disrupted, and the national economy will fall [18].

As a result of COVID-19, Indonesia's economic growth is estimated to only reach 0.4 percent of the optimal scenario of 2.3 percent. For example, in the Jakarta area, for 14 days PSBB, which seems to be a local lockdown, the economic growth reached -2.78 percent of the Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP), and the decline in household income reached -2.77 percent. That impacts 1 percent of work end in the trade, hotel, restaurant, transportation and communication, service, industry, electricity, gas, clean water, and quarrying and mining sectors. Overall, the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and corporations are affected by COVID-19 in Indonesia. The slowing performance of the global economy and manufacturing industry will impact export performance in Indonesia [19].

As ASEAN member states have different policies in curbing the pandemic, Table 1 summarizes updated reported cases in Southeast Asia.

Table 1. Coronavirus Positive Cases in ASEAN from March to 15 June 2020.

ASEAN Countries	Cases in March 2020	Cases in April 2020	Cases in May 2020	Cases of 15 June 2020
Brunei	127	138	141	141
Cambodia	107	122	125	126
Indonesia	1.414	9.771	25.773	39,294
Laos	8	19	19	19
Malaysia	2.626	5.947	7.762	8.494
Myanmar	10	150	224	262
Philippines	1.546	8.212	17.224	26.420
Singapore	844	15.641	34.366	40.604
Thailand	1.524	2.947	3.077	3.135
Vietnam	127	270	328	2

(Source: Compilation from varies sources [20, 21])

Analyzing Table 1, the most COVID-19 cases in ASEAN occurred in Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia since January 2020. Malaysia and the Philippines implemented national

lockdown. Singapore and Thailand applied local lockdown. Indonesia, Vietnam, and the rest of ASEAN countries implemented social distancing. They use the same policy, but the results are different. Vietnam, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Brunei, and Myanmar have successfully controlled the spread of the pandemic. The Philippines and Thailand have successfully reduced the number of COVID-19 cases. On the other hand, Singapore and Indonesia have failed to stop the spread of COVID-19 cases [22].

4. Conclusion

At the regional level, ASEAN has conducted the Foreign Ministerial Meeting in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. ASEAN health experts and ASEAN leaders hold regular meetings to share information about COVID-19 prevention, treatment, and facing new cases. At the national level, ASEAN member countries responded differently to the pandemic according to their respective domestic socio-economic and political circumstances. Malaysia and the Philippines implemented the national lockdown policy. Singapore and Thailand opted local lockdown policy. Then, other ASEAN countries decided to have rapid tests and social distancing with different rules and restrictions. It is due to the potential impact of COVID-19 on their domestic security, economic, and political stability.

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