

## Malaysia's 2020 Twin Crises: Opportunity to Shape a National Identity Through Creative Narratives

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents the writer's perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic as it affects Malaysia. The health crisis eclipsed the political crisis that hit the nation just as the disease began to spread in Malaysia. This paper proposes the use of creative narratives built upon commonalities among Malaysians as a more effective route to recovery in post-crisis Malaysia than the power narratives of local politics. Creative narratives are advocated as a nurturing space for the depiction and sharing of such commonalities. Creative narratives are personal stories of life-being-lived that can, for Malaysians, lay out the possibilities for shaping a truly Malaysian identity that includes all Malaysians.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Malaysia, crisis, creative narratives, commonalities, route to recovery, nurturing space, catharsis

### Introduction

In Malaysia, the SARS-Coronavirus-2 (COVID-19) infection descended as the other side of a sharp two-edged sword. Awakening to the reality of its arrival in our own backyard, we were hit in the stomach with a political coup. Just three weeks later, the only news that seemed to preoccupy the nation was related to updates on the doings of this pernicious bug. That and toilet paper.

COVID-19 stifled a strong collective response from the *rakyat* (Malay for 'people' or 'citizens') to the political crisis. It prevented the kind of organised response that in 2018 had made it possible for this multi-ethnic nation to finally begin a narrative of true inclusivity.

To be sure, the *rakyat* did rise up to protest the rubbishing of their rights. Unfortunately, the emerging health crisis quickly put a stop to any show of people power. So, while at least three gatherings were held in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur immediately after the coup, they lacked the power and impact of the mass gatherings and street rallies that had helped push the toppled government into power two years before (Bhattacharjee, 2020, February 24; Nurul, 2020, February 25; Choong, 2020, February 26; Ng, 2020, March 1, "Protesters rally

in central KL over 'backdoor' government"). Attendance was dismal.

COVID-19 was likely a main reason for the low attendance. This disease spreads fast, acting as an anti-social force that separates people in an Orwellian way. Based on media reports, the disease was indeed a concern among Malaysians by January 2020 (Hana, et al., 2020, January 31). In fact, researchers Jamari and Chia (2020, February 19) wrote that panic buying had been triggered in Malaysia "[q]uite early into the pandemic", but in a "subtle" way, that is, without documentation in the mainstream and social media. Being already armed with knowledge and awareness, then, it is likely that Malaysians were cautious about taking part in large, uncontrolled gatherings at the time.

The voice of the *rakyat* was also heard through opinion pieces in the mainstream media (Azly, 2020, February 24; Tan, 2020, February 24, "Malaysia's biggest betrayal in history: What's next?"; Kukreja, 2020, February 25; Tan, 2020, February 25, "The backdoor boys' betrayal: Parliament deserves better"; De Cruz, 2020, February 28). Social media and the Internet, too, carried the voice of the people. However, support for the 'backdoor boys' was also strong (Ng, 2020, March 1,

“#NotMyPM trends on Malaysia’s Twitter, while others voice support for new PM Muhyiddin”). By no means did the outrage expressed by individuals in cyber space grow into a protest movement, unlike in 2018. Soon, mainstream media turned their focus to the health crisis, and the *rakyat* lost their avenue for the shaping of a collective narrative of the political crisis. The mainstream media, were, however, at the disposal of the new government. The government, not yet legitimised by Parliament, was free to strengthen its hold on power, which it did.

In the one week of political high drama featuring Malaysian politicians, royalty, the Press and royalty-sponsored fast food when Malaysia was without a government, there was hope that someone, somehow would do something to steer the ship back into calmer waters. However, when on the last day of February one of the main hands in the coup was announced as the new Prime Minister, that hope crumbled. Fatigue, disgust and resignation replaced it.

The *rakyat* had invested too much of themselves into the 2018 movement to bring a new government to power. Now the pre-2018 pack were back. The *rakyat*’s will to respond seemed weak in the face of a severe health crisis that distanced people from one another and restricted their movement at a time when solidarity and action were needed. Coping with the fallout would have to be a private matter.

Then, COVID-19 moved to center-stage.

## How COVID-19 Displaced Malaysia’s Political Crisis

### *Leaders with No Narrative?*

Leaders of the former government had one crucial week when they might have turned things around. True, there were just too many twists and turns. Finally, it was down to who actually had the majority to lead in Parliament. Both sides were busy that week counting and recounting their numbers as several Members of Parliament scampered to where the power had shifted. It was a bizarre scenario. Democracy had been pared down to its most basic requirement, a head count. Integrity was just another foreign word.

At the same time, the deep conflict between the component parties of the former ruling coalition was finally out in the open. Dislike, disrespect and distrust for one

another were on display for everyone to see. It was deeply disheartening to witness for Malaysians who had believed the narrative of hope and inclusivity broadly dispersed in 2018.

In fact, rumbling in the media about the very real possibility of a political earthquake had begun almost as soon as the former government came to power. It peaked in the latter half of 2019. In October 2019, the topic of a ‘backdoor government’ toppling the duly elected government received extensive coverage in the mainstream media (“Desperate parties trying to form back-door government, says Azmin”, 2019, October 22; “No such thing as backdoor govt in Melaka, says chief minister”, 2019, October 25; “Melaka CM: State is focused on the people, not change of govt talk”, 2019, October 26; “No discussions to form back door govt with Umno, says Melaka PPBM”, 2020, October 27; Amar, 2019, October 28; Tee, 2019, October 29). Although sources in these reports denied that a collapse of the government was imminent, in local politics, denials can signal that what is being denied is true. On January 9, 2020 an online news article boldly claimed that the ruling coalition was likely to see a drastic change before May 2020 (“DAP may be out of the government soon”, 2020, January 9). Just one week before the coup, an article in the mainstream media mooted several what-if scenarios that could change the political landscape of Malaysia suddenly and drastically (Golingai, 2020, February 16).

It is hard to imagine that the people who were actually running the government at the time did not know what journalists seemed to know. Yet, there had been no back-up plan for dealing with the eventuality of a backdoor government coming to power. When it did happen, the ousted leaders could not manage even a narrative that in that crucial week could have consolidated and directed people power to bring back the people’s government. The only ‘narrative’ coming from their camp was fragmented noise, feeding off a sense of personal betrayal, finger pointing and oft-repeated key words like ‘betrayed’, ‘traitors’, ‘backdoor government’ and ‘high moral ground’ (“Anwar meets DAP, *Amanah* leaders after claiming betrayal by coalition partners”, 2020, February 24; “I feel betrayed by Muhyiddin, says Dr M”, 2020, March 1). The *rakyat*, the ones actually betrayed, although in deep shock, at least seemed to have a narrative. It is perhaps best captured by a comment made in one opinion piece: “What a bunch of losers we voted into power . . . two years ago” (Azly, 2020, February 24). It was clear that the coalition would never have been able to work out their differences and a government collapse had been inevitable.

## **COVID-19 and the New Normal for Democracy in Malaysia**

When the disease escalated to pandemic level, there was no longer a need for a political narrative by anyone. COVID-19 was directing the power narrative in Malaysia. While individual blogs and social media did bring up the power grab, the mainstream media became strangely muted on the topic. They reported news of sackings, resignations and new appointments in the government. They carried opinion pieces on the coup, but seemed largely unwilling to fuel a narrative that would be counter-productive at a time when unity and focus were necessary. Leaders of the hijacked former government recognised this too and kept the peace. The disease was now terrorising the entire world. Everyone had to focus on fighting the virus. Perhaps this simple principle will have taught the previous ruling coalition the value of unity.

COVID-19 also allowed the new Prime Minister to move fast. The new Opposition were clamouring for an urgent sitting of Parliament to determine the actual headcount of both sides (Arfa & Tharanya, 2020, March 1). Partial lockdown was enforced under the Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 18. Parliament was postponed for two months. However, in April, the promised 15-day sitting was reduced to only one day "in line with the Movement Control Order (MCO)" ("Parliament to convene on May 18 for only one day", 2020, April 17). After the Speaker of the House on May 8 allowed a no-confidence motion against the Prime Minister to be introduced at the sitting, it was announced on May 13 that the session would be further truncated to a half-day episode of listening to the King's address. The reason was that "the spread of COVID-19 ha[d] not fully abated" (Amir, 2020, May 13). So, on May 18, there were no debates. Parliament will only meet again in July. No explanation has been given as to why most businesses have been allowed to resume operation since May 4 but Parliament, under tight control conditions, cannot meet. Meanwhile, the delay allowed more Members of Parliament to cross over to the new government. It is rumoured that more will do so ("Another PKR MP to quit party", 2020, May 22).

### **The Action of Crisis on Social Systems and Individuals**

Seeger and Sellnow (2016) presented crisis as an extreme, disruptive event leading to a negative conclusion but not always so. MacDonald (2016) averred that crisis presents both danger and opportunity. Crises are extreme threats to existing social structures that require radical measures

to dismantle the attendant threat for a return to order. Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO), implemented on March 18, is one such measure. Generally, Malaysians recognise the need for the radical move, which is not at all drastic compared, for instance, with India's lockdown (Roy, 2020). Nevertheless, it has been a struggle for many ("Minister: Cops to drag", 2020).

Because of the extreme threat and the resultant fear it induces in people experiencing it, crisis leads to trauma. Research into coping strategies employed in perceived low-control situations suggests that people approach life believing they have control over constructs that affect them directly. When something abruptly rocks that perception, in this case a political and immediately after, a health crisis, their immediate response is to re-establish perceived control through "compensatory strategies" (p. 1) that provide structure in times of uncertainty. The panic buying and hoarding triggered by the announcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia are examples of such coping strategies. People were resorting to compensatory behaviours to cope with anxiety induced by the health crisis (Otis, 2020; "Panic buying hits Penang", 2020; Chen et al., 2016).

While this is taking place, Seeger and Sellnow (2016) proposed, "a narrative space" for explanation and meaning is created that will be filled with narratives about the crisis from different sources. These 'crisis narratives', with or without an agenda to shape power narratives, attempt to provide explanation and meaning at a time of threat, and are sought out as intervention strategies (Ragan, 2016). The aim is to regain control over the presenting chaos and confusion.

In the case of Malaysia, deep conflict within the former ruling coalition gave the former Opposition the opportunity to launch a successful attack. In the chaos that followed the coup, neither the *rakyat* nor the ousted group could offer a strong collective narrative. The chaos was opportunity for the former Opposition to craft a crisis narrative that won them power and then strengthened their hold on it. The need to defeat a malevolent virus called for unity. Extreme measures like social distancing and partial lockdown were necessary. These measures then became convenient reasons to postpone Parliament twice and block a no-confidence vote. Meanwhile, the new government had access to the mainstream media, and could focus the nation's attention on its efforts to mitigate the effects of the health crisis. The will to direct the power narrative through control of the mainstream media was seen most clearly when only government news agencies were allowed to cover the King's address

to Parliament on May 18 on grounds that crowding was to be avoided. The counter narrative to this from the Opposition is that the new Prime Minister is too scared to face a no-confidence vote in Parliament because he does not have the numbers (“Mahathir slams Malaysian gov’t for shortened Parliament meet”, 2020, May 18) and will contrive to fix this by inducing more Members of Parliament to cross over to his camp.

### Re-Establishing Voice Through Creative Narratives

The chaos created by the twin crises, however, may hold larger opportunity for Malaysia. Freedom of speech in Malaysia is mediated by the need to accommodate the constructs of race and religion. This is a multi-ethnic society still thrashing out a common identity. Malaysians enjoy freedom to share thoughts and opinions, unlike in some countries, but there are socio-political issues that if broached must be done with wisdom and discretion. Perhaps what cannot be voiced out in words may be done through creative narratives.

Creative narratives are stories of personal lives lived and being lived told through written texts, speech acts and a myriad of creative events ranging from grand and sophisticated forms such as theatre, song and music to the most simple and basic personal sharing of life-being-lived that technology has made possible. Everyone is the protagonist of their own life-story, and today, everyone is able to capture, record and share that unique story as part of the larger narrative of life. Creative narratives are freely available on the Internet today.

Chaos caused by Malaysia’s twin crises has given Malaysians a lot of time for reflection. It has been possible to revisit the events of the past two years and national history as a whole, too. The Malaysians who entered isolation on March 18 are likely to emerge on June 9, if there are no more extensions to the Movement Control Order, changed in perspective about many things, especially those that matter the most in life. It will be interesting to see how and what the *rakyat* will choose hereon.

### Narratives in Time of Crisis

The power of narratives, especially creative narratives that tap into deeper areas of the mind often unreachable to cognition, lies in this empowerment of the individual who shares a personal story of crisis and recovery. Medicine itself, the major front-liner in the COVID-19 health crisis, uses narratives as part and parcel of the

doctor’s craft. Without the narrative provided by history-taking, diagnosis and cure cannot be formulated. Aeman, Hena, Natasha and Asad (2017) showed that in medicine, narratives provide stability because space has been given for active reflection leading to catharsis.

Wang and Geale acknowledged that narratives “[amplify] voices that may have otherwise remained silent” (2015, p. 195). Through cathartic story-telling, narratives present specific experience to the public that can “heal and soothe” and bring “hope and courage” to “explore and grow” as well as encourage “dialogue and reflection” that is “intertwined and cyclical” (p. 198).

This is necessary for Malaysia. Malaysians deserve a new story. The old one is toxic at its worst and boring at its mildest. Hope is not attached to political parties or movements but in the will of people to bring to realisation what they instinctively recognise to be good, and goodness is spilling over in the diversity that is Malaysia. That goodness needs to be harnessed to tell new stories about Malaysia.

### A Failed Narrative

In the 2018 election, the Malaysian voice spoke up loudly for new direction for the nation through clean governance and inclusivity. Unfortunately, all there was at the time to manage the shaping of that direction was a coalition whose fissures had been veiled by an immense sense of oneness of purpose that everyone chose to interpret as unity. The grandness of the scheme of crafting a truly Malaysian identity was worth the attempt. It failed.

Perhaps it is now time for Malaysia to consider possibilities beyond what is currently on offer. Old politics and politicians should perhaps go into isolation while younger Malaysians who are willing to look beyond the old constructs of race and religion and who have the creativity to do it in positive, inclusive ways should lead in crafting a power narrative for Malaysia based on the national dynamics of today. The old filters of pre-Independence are no longer useable in the year 2020, the year of ‘perfect vision’. It is time to try new routes to nurturing unity.

### Whispered Narratives: A New Voice Breaking

The *rakyat* filled the long challenging days of being stuck at home during the Movement Control Order (MCO) with many examples of how to craft a new direction for Malaysia through creative narratives. Two striking examples of the

power of creative narratives to shape opportunities for inclusivity in Malaysia are considered here.

A home-made video was posted on Youtube of a portion of one of the new Prime Minister's addresses to the nation. It had been reworked to the beat of hip-hop music, and presented a man in typical Malaysian at-home garb dancing to the catchy, upbeat music in his home (*Lagu rap*, 2020, "Ke Sana, Ke Sini"). It was an instant hit with Malaysians. It bypassed politics, race and religion, and simply rode on positive energy during an oppressive time. It effectively brought together technology, creative energy and expression, comedic appeal and a keen appreciation for opportunity. Malaysians were delighted! Dressing in the recognisably Malaysian *sarung* (long skirt wrapped around the waist, worn by men and women), the favourite casual wear of many Malaysians of all ages, was a stroke of genius. It captured the *rakyat's* shared identity and at the same time commented on the shared sense of resignation to being stuck at home indefinitely. It demonstrated the transformative power of creativity: restriction converted to hope and energy.

That infectious video inspired other Malaysians to post their own versions of the dance, thereby beginning on a positive note a discourse on what Malaysian-ness might look like post-crisis. The difficulties awaiting Malaysia and the rest of the world will need communities to work together. For that, people will need to look for commonalities, no matter how long social distancing is going to be a feature of life post-COVID-19. This particular creative narrative united Malaysians and possibly even eroded some of the resentment towards the new Prime Minister, who had been a key player in bringing down the 'people's government'.

The second example was the cooking shows produced by a young Indian Malaysian woman. S. Pavithra's no-frill videos as a very new Youtuber turned her into a Malaysian celebrity during the Movement Control Order, although her intention had simply been to earn an extra income for her family. Her videos showed how to cook Indian dishes familiar to Malaysians. Subscribers took to her simplicity, sincerity and humility. Many praised her for using affordable and easily available ingredients, keeping her recipes and methods simple and speaking in the national language.

The last point enabled all Malaysians to reproduce her simple but tasty dishes. Unfortunately, several viewers saw this unity-building strength as weakness, and objected to her use of the national language, stating that it made Indian Malaysian cooking accessible to

other Malaysians. Loyal subscribers of all races quickly defended her and denounced the small-mindedness of her critics. The new Prime Minister again struck the right note with the *rakyat* when he sent her a set of cooking utensils, a tripod and foodstuff to acknowledge her initiative and to encourage her to continue. She has probably won more subscribers now, as also perhaps the new Prime Minister. Hopefully, her critics will now be schooled on the benefits of inclusivity. Even better, that attitude like theirs is what leads to the collapse of elected governments.

Seeger and Sellnow (2016) argued that crises can be powerful agents of social change. Perhaps this is the reset that the twin crises of 2020 will switch on, while the old rantings of race and religion are switched off in Malaysian genes. As Malaysians encode their personal story in the nurturing space of creative narratives, this can be the new outbreak of hope.

## Conclusion

The act of producing narratives, especially creative narratives, can have much cathartic benefit (Aeman, Hena, Natasha, & Asad, 2017; Wang & Geale, 2015) as it requires the subjects to draw on creativity as well as employ cognitive skills to shape thoughts through the process of ordering and sequencing. Such an opportunity allows them to regain a sense of control in the face of a low-control situation such as a crisis (Yap & Chen, 2020; Chen et al., 2017; Seeger & Selnow, 2016; Landau et al., 2015). For Malaysians, the crisis was two-fold as COVID-19 hit at about the same time as a political coup that brought down the government.

Narratives are a precious nurturing space for shared experience, and post-crisis Malaysia is going to require commonalities as a basis for the huge mission of rebuilding the nation. Creative narratives that weave together the Malaysian story will capture thread by thread the variance present in the genetics of Malaysian diversity and present new routes to rebuilding the nation based on a truly Malaysian identity. Such a tapestry of possibilities can enrich not just this nation, but the rest of Southeast Asia as well, the world even.

## Competing Interest Statement

The author has read and approved the manuscript and takes full responsibility for the contents. The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

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## Biographical Statement of Author

Crescentia graduated from Universiti Malaya with a Bachelor of Arts (First Class Hons) in English Literature in 1992 and a Master of Arts, also in English Literature, in 1999. She served a scholarship bond with the *New Straits Times* as a journalist after receiving her first degree, and then returned to Universiti Malaya to enrol in the MA programme. She obtained her MA in 1999 upon submission of a thesis entitled 'The Jew in America: The Dialogue of Becoming in the Fiction of Abraham Cahan'.



In order to learn more about the world, she chose to work with Pearson Longman Malaysia rather than continue life as an academic. She stayed with Pearson for seven years, rising from Editor to Senior Editor to Commissioning Editor. She took a break of a year and half to try her hand at freelance writing, during which time she also taught

English in an orphanage in Cambodia for three and a half months. She joined full-time teaching with Taylor's University in 2008 as a lecturer in English with the School of Hospitality and Culinary Arts. In 2011, she moved to the International Medical University in Bukit Jalil, where she taught Academic English and humanities subjects to medical, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy and health science students.

Crescentia's greatest passion is putting words together to arrive at meaning. Meaning has been her highest goal from childhood, long before she realised it was her pursuit. She delights in writing short stories and poetry. She also enjoys academic writing. Her area of interest is healing narratives.

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