

Machiavelli's return

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The virus strikes back

Singapore is learning the harsh lessons of economic inequalities in its fight against Covid-19

By James Crabtree

Few things show Singapore's changing fortunes in its battle against coronavirus more clearly than the ping of daily government WhatsApp messages, which arrive each afternoon on my phone with updates on the pandemic.

A month ago these often brought feelings of quiet satisfaction, with figures showing the city-state's near-exemplary virus-battling performance: a few dozen new daily cases, perhaps, but, until 21 March at least, no deaths. As Europe and the US succumbed to the virus, those of us living here felt as if we'd already been immunised, if only by the competence of Singapore's technocratic state.

Over recent weeks, those same WhatsApp messages have grown more ominous, however, as infection levels rise. The message of Sunday 3 May, which arrived at 3:39pm, was typical: 657 new infections, bringing the island's total above 18,000, more than anywhere else in Asia except China, India and Pakistan.

Until recently, Singapore's response to Covid-19 was among the world's most

effective, part an elite club of mostly rich East Asian nations such as South Korea and Taiwan. All learned lessons from earlier epidemics, notably Sars in the early 2000s; all boasted competent states able to roll out systems of testing and contact tracing that stumped governments in the UK and elsewhere.

Migrant dormitories often house more than a dozen men per room

Yet pandemics have a way of exposing softness in any national underbelly. "Epidemic diseases are not random events which afflict societies capriciously," as Yale's Frank Snowden writes in *Epidemics and Society* (2019), a book on the history of such diseases. "Every society produces its own specific vulnerabilities."

In Singapore's case it took a few months for Covid-19 to hone in on the country's migrant workers. Now those daily WhatsApp messages pointedly break down infections

into subcategories, to make it clear that only a small proportion of cases are actually Singapore citizens. The vast majority of the rest fall within a group described as "work permit holders (residing in dormitories)".

These are men from countries such as Bangladesh and India. More than 300,000 of them work in Singapore as builders, cleaners, gardeners and labourers, living in 43 huge, purpose-built dorms dotted around the island's more isolated periphery, far from the downtown skyscrapers that they have often helped to build. The speed at which the virus spread among them is startling. At the start of April there were just 19 such migrant worker cases. By the weekend of 2-3 May, 15,833 had been infected.

As this new outbreak spiked in early April, Singapore's government introduced a full set of lockdown measures, known euphemistically as a "circuit breaker", which are set to last until 1 June. So great is the weight of new cases that those afternoon WhatsApp messages now provide only preliminary figures, leaving teams of civil servants toiling into the night to send out a second message with the day's final tally.



Mirror image: a masked woman walks in Marina Bay, Singapore on 4 May

Singapore has high levels of immigration by almost any standard, with roughly 1.7 million migrants in a country of 5.6 million. Just a fraction of these work on construction sites, but they have proved vulnerable to coronavirus in part because the dorms they sleep in often house a dozen or more men per room. So far more than 20 such facilities have been isolated, including the S11 Dormitory, a collection of brightly coloured, warehouse-like buildings on the island's north-eastern shore that normally houses 13,000 men and has been among the worst affected by the outbreak.

Migrants are central to Singapore's economic model, from well-heeled expat lawyers and financiers to women from countries such as Indonesia and Myanmar who work as live-in maids for middle-class families. My own relatively comfortable period of lockdown has involved hours spent gazing out of my office window over a vista of Housing Development Board high-rise flats, part of the widely admired public

housing system in which four-fifths of Singaporeans live, most of which were built with migrant labour.

The rise in infection rates has brought a degree of soul-searching from Singapore's elite, alongside criticism from those who worry that the country's economic rise has produced alarming levels of inequality in its wake. Tommy Koh, a former diplomat, wrote in the *Straits Times* – an English-language newspaper in Singapore – that lessons need to be learned, suggesting that “we owe the foreign workers an apology for the atrocious condition of their dormitories”.

Yet whatever lessons Singapore learns about its own future, its real warning is for other countries as they ponder the lengthy period of coronavirus management to come. Singapore's dormitory crisis marks the country's third wave of infections. It efficiently dealt with the initial two, which came first from China, and then from Singaporeans returning from abroad. But on this third wave the authorities have proved less competent. Writing on Facebook, Bilahari Kausikan, another well-known exp-diplomat, put it bluntly: “We did drop the

ball on [foreign workers] which are invisible to most Singaporeans.”

Singapore's public administration remains highly competent, albeit not perfect. Compared to most countries in Europe and North America, its pandemic response has been well organised. Its number of deaths, at just 18, remains exceptionally low. Yet this has not been enough to prevent a resurgence in infections.

Much the same is true elsewhere in Asia, as countries that seemed to have found successful coronavirus formulas are having to reinforce some restrictions on weary residents. Last month China was forced to lock down the north-eastern city of Harbin following a new outbreak. Japan extended its lockdown earlier this month, too, as infection numbers began to spike once again. And if this grim cycle can happen in a country as well-organised as Singapore, the odds are that plenty of other nations will have to endure it soon enough. ●

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