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SINGAPORE'S COVID-19 MISCALCULATION BITES HARD

By
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February belief the virus had been conquered were cruelly wrong.

For Singapore, it has been a sad comedown. Officials in the meticulous, technocratic nation-state in early February thought they had beaten the Covid-19 crisis, having responded quicker than any almost country in the world to the pandemic's crisis, only to have it return to blossom into a new crisis.

“Singapore was almost the first to ban entry of people from the mainland and since has been shown to be very thorough in tracing and testing possible carriers,” according to an Asia Sentinel report on February 6. “There have been no reports of shortages of masks or other equipment need to protect either the general public or health care workers. The government has provided very detailed information about the transmissions, their timelines and the links of infected persons.”

Today, however, Singapore, with 26,098 transmissions, leads Southeast Asia in cases, with more than 20,000 of them still active, and with economists extremely pessimistic about near-term prospects. Job and wage losses are expected across many sectors later this year. Tourism, which attracted 19.1 million visitors in 2019 with receipts at S\$27.1 billion (US\$19.02 billion), has collapsed although there are no current figures. Total merchandise trade, which hit S\$1.022 trillion in 2019, is also expected to be hammered. As with the rest of the region, recovery is expected to be slow and painful.

With 752 new cases on May 15, the island republic’s health care system remains under strain and with deficiencies found in testing procedures. A laboratory released 33 “false positives,” and the error was uncovered only because of random re-testing. On May 15, perhaps stung by the rising tide of infections, the government announced it had developed a kit that is capable of delivering a result on a potential infection within an hour.

However, recorded deaths remain extremely low, at just 21, or 0.083 percent, testimony to the city’s excellent health system and the fact that most of the ill are relatively young and healthy.

“Contact tracing applications are desultory to speak of,” said a Singaporean source who asked not to be named. So far, 38,282 tests have been conducted per million of the country’s 5.7 million people. That is a total of 224,262 tests.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who is expected to retire from politics at the age of 68, mis-stepped in April by saying it wasn’t necessary to wear a facemask for healthy people. That statement has now been put on hold.

“The pandemic and its fallout are clearly hurting the economy with its national carrier, SIA reporting losses of more US\$200 million,” the source said, “the airport closing two of its terminals, the seaports tamed, shops and retails outlets shuttered and impoverished by the extent of the shutdown, and country clubs, schools, and all commercial enterprises retreating into the fading recesses of a once high-octane economy.

It is clear that health authorities miscalculated badly in ignoring the health care needs of 650,000-odd manual laborers who live in dormitories on the island and do almost all of its dirty work. Authorities have responded with a ferocious effort to clean up the dormitories.

“We are going all out to suppress the virus outbreak in the foreign worker dormitories,” said Lawrence Wong, the National Development Minister and

Second Minister for Finance, said in mid-April. “It’s a massive undertaking involving many people on the front line including the Singapore Armed Forces and Police Force officers, officials from the Ministry of Manpower, healthcare doctors and nurses and many private sector partners including security firms like Certis Cisco and food caterers like the Singapore Airport Terminal Services.”

The reappearance of the virus has undoubtedly wiped out any chance of an early election, which at one point was rumored for April 2020. That window has now closed. National elections must be held before April 2021 under Singapore’s Westminster-style parliamentary system. Public approval of the government’s handling of the coronavirus has fallen to 40 percent, an unheard-of level of antipathy to a government normally surefooted in handling such problems.

“Many observers would have expected the well-oiled and efficient city-state to run mandatory testing for all its citizens,” the source told Asia Sentinel. But it didn’t. Neither did it test all of its migrant workers despite claims to the contrary by the Manpower Minister [Josephine Teo]. If it truly had, as the minister claims, why is there is a sudden and unexplained explosion of infections? It also leaves one to wonder if they have tested the more than 10,000 prisoners in the country’s jails?”

While Singapore has one of the lowest mortality rates internationally, there has been a recent uptick in the number of deaths. The authorities have also excluded from the tally five relatively young COVID-19 patients that died, recording them as deaths from heart attacks for example, causing some confusion and anxiety.

Authorities are considering ways to increase contact tracing capabilities through a mobile app called “TraceTogether, as “circuit-breaker” restrictions are gradually lifted from June 1, according to a report by the Singapore-based country risk firm Vriens & Partners. “The Government Technology Agency (GovTech) team behind TraceTogether is in discussions with global tech majors to improve the app, which has only been adopted by 25 percent of the population due to concerns over privacy issues and battery usage.

The government may introduce and fast track temporary legislation in Parliament to mandate some form of tech adoption for contact tracing, while providing assurance that the data will only be used for contact-tracing. This would be done by including a “sunset clause” for deleting the data once the pandemic subsides.

Anxious bureaucrats are pondering over the worst-case scenario that Singapore’s tourism and trade-dependent economy may take years to recover. Record job and wage losses are almost certain later this year. Singapore experienced its largest fall in year-on-year retail sales in over 20 years in March (prior to the partial lockdown), has shuttered two of its four airport terminals, and the national carrier, Singapore Airlines, announced it would make a full-year net loss for the first time in its 48-year history.

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