HASHTAG CAMPAIGNS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MALAYSIA

Escalating from Online to Offline

Pauline Pooi Yin Leong and
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ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Hashtag Campaigns during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia: Escalating from Online to Offline

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Hashtag campaigns on social media enable users to express their sentiments on various issues and mobilize people to be part of a movement or cause; they have been used effectively by disenfranchised members of society against powerful elites.
- While some are of the opinion that online campaigns are ineffective due to "slacktivism", such campaigns can spill over to offline protests, especially if there are strong emotions such as anger, or a sense of injustice or social deprivation, spurring people on.
- The earlier hashtag campaigns in Malaysia—#AntaraDuaDarjat (#BetweenTwoStatus) and #DengkiKe (#AreYouJealous)—were expressions of unhappiness over perceived double standards in the enforcement of COVID-19 public safety protocols.
- Later hashtag campaigns such as #KerajaanGagal (#FailedGovernment), #KerajaanZalim (#CruelGovernment) and #KerajaanPembunuh (#MurdererGovernment) became increasingly negative as public disenchantment grew due to the government's weak handling of the pandemic and the consequent economic fallout.
- Public frustration that manifested itself in the #BenderaHitam (#BlackFlag) and #Lawan (#Protest) movements soon transitioned into offline campaigns and protests against the government.
- Apart from political hashtag campaigns, there were also welfare movements such as #KitaJagaKita (#WeTakeCareOfOurselves), #BenderaPutih (#WhiteFlag) and #RakyatJagaRakyat (#CitizensTakeCareOfCitizens), which enabled Malaysians to help

the less fortunate affected financially by the COVID-19 lockdowns, by rendering food aid and other assistance.
- A key conclusion of this study is that online hashtag campaigns have served as early warning of trending public sentiment. They also have the potential to hype up emotions online and subsequently galvanize support for offline campaigns and protests. As #Lawan and #BenderaHitam showed, these can have direct political outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content".[2] In Malaysia, social media has played an important role in democratic and political processes by enabling greater access to knowledge and information and expanding the public sphere for discussion. In fact, digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have become strategic tools for social mobilization and protest[3] because of their ability to function as networked communication spaces.[4] One striking feature of social media is the hashtag function in relation to topics, issues and events.

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[2] A.M. Kaplan and M. Haenlein, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media", *Business Horizons* 53, no. 1 (2010): 59–68.

[3] J. Herman, "Hashtags and Human Rights: Activism in the Age of Twitter", Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 12 November 2014, https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/ethics_online/0099/:pf_printable

[4] A. Hermida, "#journalism: Reconfiguring Journalism Research About Twitter, One Tweet at a Time", *Digital Journalism* 1, no. 3 (2013): 295–313.

In a hashtag, the pound sign (#, also known as a hash) precedes a word or phrase and is often used as conversational features on social media, especially Twitter. Hashtags allow people to tag content on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter; it is a metadata indexing system that is used to identify specific posts on social media, and helps users to easily navigate and search for posts on various platforms.[5] The political hashtag often refers to a politically controversial topic under discussion that could involve political figures, movements, causes, locations or issues.[6]

From the semiotic perspective, hashtags are indicators of the intended meaning of the user's statement[7] and empowers online communities to establish themselves around issues or causes.[8] When these are mediatized in cyberspace, "ad hoc"[9] or "intimate publics"[10] may form, centring around hashtags. Thus, hashtag activism is the "discursive protest on social media united through a hash tagged word, phrase or sentence";[11] hashtags are used to highlight issues and mobilize participants to be part of a cause

[5] B. Barbee, "Are You #stoked or #overit? The Complete Guide to Hashtags on Social Media", *Digital Trends*, 18 February 2018, https://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/what-is-a-hashtag/

[6] D.M. Romero, B. Meeder and J. Kleinbreg, "Differences in the Mechanics of Information Diffusion Across Topics: Idioms, Political Hashtags and Contagion on Twitter". Paper presented at the 20th International Conference on the World Wide Web, Hyderabad, India, 28 March – 1 April 2011.

[7] Y. Bonilla and J. Rosa, "#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States", *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (2015).

[8] A. Bruns and J. Burgess, "The Use of Twitter Hashtags in the Formation of Ad Hoc Publics", Paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research Conference, Reykjavik, Iceland, 25–27 August 2011.

[9] Ibid.

[10] S. Khoja-Moolji, "Becoming an 'Intimate Publics': Exploring the Affective Intensities of Hashtag Feminism", *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 2 (2015): 347–50.

[11] G. Yang, "Narrative Agency in Hashtag Activism: The Case of #Black LivesMatter", *Media and Communication* 4, no. 4: (2016).

or movement. For its proponents, "democracy is just a tweet away"[12] and online campaigns can be used effectively by disenfranchised members of society against powerful elites. The decision to tweet is sometimes based on a political issue, event or topic that triggers the Twitter user's interest and awareness and is congruent with his/her political predisposition, after which he/she encodes the responses within the technological design of the digital service.[13] There are three types of political events that might influence users to tweet: Direct experience such as actual participation in campaign events or political meetings; indirect mediated experience such as watching televised debates or reading news reports; and encountering Internet content such as tweets or Facebook posts.[14]

A review of the literature suggests that hashtag activism from protests to fund-raising are becoming necessary and complementary to offline campaigns.[15] Activists can expand campaign reach through "message clustering, modification, rebroadcasting, or replying within the context of more extensive conversations".[16] Live tweeting of events and protests in real time provides views from the ground and publicity for the campaign, which in turn become journalistic content for the media that attracts attention from policy elites.[17] Retweeting enables supporters who are not

[12] E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

[13] A. Jungherr, H. Schoen, and P. Jürgens, "The Mediation of Politics through Twitter: An Analysis of Messages Posted during the Campaign for the German Federal Election 2013", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21, no. 1 (2016): 50–68.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Bonilla and Rosa, "#Ferguson".

[16] S.S. Ofori-Parku, and D. Moscato, "Hashtag Activism as a Form of Political Action: A Qualitative Analysis of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign in Nigerian, UK, and U.S. Press", *International Journal of Communication* 12, no. 23 (2018): 2480–502.

[17] J. Penney and C. Dadas, "(Re)tweeting in the Service of Protest: Digital Composition and Circulation in the Occupy Wall Street Movement", *New Media & Society* 16, no. 1 (2014): 74–90.

physically present to assist in the campaign by circulating information that could influence public opinion.[18]

The issue of whether online activism has been effective in promoting lasting offline action is still being debated.[19] Some critics see online hashtag activism campaigns as fleeting[20] and encourage "slacktivism" by making people think that they have sufficiently participated in a campaign just by posting on social media from the comfort of their rooms.[21] In order to transcend from the online environment to offline reality, social movements need to ensure that people are able to connect between the two and facilitate a successful social change.[22] A study on street protests in Malaysia organized by Bersih (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) found that its online campaigns, through the use of #bersih and #bersihstories, shaped "new discourses of identity and belonging".[23] It also strengthened social ties between networked citizens and mobilized thousands who defied government warnings to protest at the street rallies. In the case of Bersih's online activism and street rallies, the public's fury against the exorbitant levels of corruption in the government drove people to take collective action beyond cyberspace.[24] The affective aspect can

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[18] Bruns and Burgess, "The Use of Twitter Hashtags in the Formation of Ad Hoc Publics".

[19] M. Loken, "#BringBackOurGirls and the Invisibility of Imperialism", *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 6 (2014): 1100–1.

[20] B. Wasik, *And Then There's This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

[21] Herman, "Hashtags and Human Rights".

[22] S. Valenzuela, "Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior: The Roles of Information, Opinion Expression, and Activism", *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (2013): 920–42.

[23] G.C. Khoo, "Bersih dan Ubah: Citizenship Rights, Intergenerational Togetherness and Multicultural Unity in Malaysia", in *Worlding Multiculturalisms: The Politics of Inter-Asian Dwelling*, edited by D.S. Goh (London: Routledge, 2013).

[24] J. Postill, "A Critical History of Internet Activism and Social Protest in Malaysia 1998–2011", *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 1, no. 2 (2014): 78–103.

be the transitional bridge between online and offline participation and studies have shown how emotions such as anger can hasten or intensify protests.[25] Strong emotions such as indignation due to a sense of injustice or social depravation may spur people to overcome their fear or apathy to protest on the streets instead of just online.[26] Thus affect can be a factor that drives social movement participation.[27]

This paper is an in-depth study into the hashtag campaigns on Twitter that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. According to the 2021 statistics from DataReportal, a data analysis website, there are about 28 million active social media users in Malaysia, which amounts to 86 per cent of the total population.[28] Of this number, almost half (49 per cent) are on Twitter, with its users using the moniker Twitterjaya to describe their virtual community. Thus, Twitter is a useful platform to gauge public sentiment in Malaysia, especially during the COVID-19 crisis when most were forced to stay at home under the movement control orders (MCOs); they turned to social media to obtain information about the pandemic, and to vent their feelings on their situation.

Initially, it appeared that the Malaysian government had managed to contain the crisis in the first half of 2020 due to a strict MCO. However, the numbers spiked after the Sabah state election in September 2020; this led to a second MCO in mid-January 2021, and then a third in May 2021. The subsequent MCOs were more lenient, with key economic sectors being allowed to open. However, this meant that the COVID-19 cases did not decrease sufficiently to manageable levels. Despite various MCOs, there were spikes in daily cases of infections, leading

[25] J. Van Stekelenburg and B. Klandermans, "The Social Psychology of Protest", *Current Sociology Review* 61 (2013): 886–905.

[26] J. Jasper, "The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements", *Sociological Forum* 13 (1998): 397–424.

[27] A. Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[28] S. Kemp, "Digital 2021: Malaysia". *DataReportal.com*, 11 February 2021, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-malaysia

to anger with the government's management of the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, there were so many U-turns and flip-flops in the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that confused netizens sarcastically named the acronym as *Semua Orang Pening* (Everyone Gets Headache). The continuous lockdown had a severe impact on the Malaysian economy as unemployment rose and businesses shuttered, leading to unhappiness and frustration among Malaysians who were hanging on a thread and trying to survive the crisis. In this study, the researchers used a computer software to extract Twitter data on the various notable hashtag campaigns that had emerged in Malaysia during the COVID-19 situation in 2021.
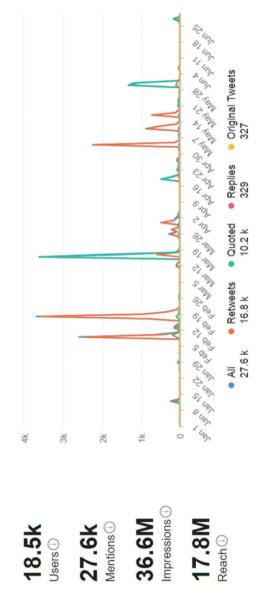
#AntaraDuaDarjat

The #AntaraDuaDarjat (#BetweenTwoStatus) hashtag which emerged in the first quarter of 2021 was an early warning that Malaysians were becoming unhappy about the perceived double standards of COVID-19 SOP enforcements. During the second and third MCOs, reports emerged in Malaysian cyberspace that members of the elite were flaunting SOPs, including ministers, members of parliament (MPs) and celebrities. The average Malaysian citizen, already chafing under one MCO after another, became infuriated when they saw "*orang kayangan*" (elites) flaunting their ability to get away with non-compliance of SOPs. Although there was uproar over their transgressions, the authorities either delayed or took minimal action against them, while "*orang marhaen*" (ordinary citizens) faced immediate action or maximum punishment for breaching SOPs. Weak enforcement among the elites compared to strong-arm actions taken on the public led to a strong perception of double standards.

Figure 1 shows that the hashtags first spiked between 8 and 9 February when then Health Minister Adham Baba reduced the quarantine period from ten days to three days for ministers returning from overseas trips[29]

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[29] Ahmad Naqib I., "Cabinet Ministers Now Need to Be Quarantined Only for Three Days", *The Edge Markets*, 8 February 2021, https://www.theedgemarkets. com/article/cabinet-ministers-now-need-be-quarantined-only-three-days

Figure 1: Frequency of "#AntaraDuaDarjat" and various iterations in Twitter from 1 January to 1 July 2021

18.5k
Users ⓘ

27.6k
Mentions ⓘ

36.6M
Impressions ⓘ

17.8M
Reach ⓘ

(see Figure 1). On 9 February 2021, graphic artist cum activist Fahmi Reza posted a series of memes in his tweet "Orang biasa vs Menteri #AntaraDuaDarjat" (Ordinary people vs Ministers) which contributed to the hashtag spike (see Figure 2).

The next issue that caused the hashtag to viral again happened on 17–18 February 2021 when a video showing former Federal Territories Minister Annuar Musa breaching SOP by having a sit-down meal with six others at a table during his visit to a community project in Cheras when the then SOP only allowed two persons per table. Annuar claimed that he only sat for a while and moved off after realizing that the organizers were not following SOP. Responding to this incident, the Kuala Lumpur police chief stated that the RM1,000 compound had not yet been issued to the minister because the case needed to be referred to the Attorney General's chambers, adding that the police needed to record statements from other individuals to obtain concrete proof and evidence.[30] This was in stark contrast to the statement issued by then Senior Minister (Security) Datuk Ismail Sabri who had previously stated in October 2020 that the Attorney General allowed the Royal Malaysian Police to issue compounds immediately to individuals who breached SOPs.[31] State assemblywoman Lim Yi Wei's tweet on 17 February 2021 about this show of double standards in enforcement was retweeted 6,122 times (see Figure 3).

The next spike in the hashtag followed controversial wedding celebrations of elites such as the daughter of Datuk Seri Jalaluddin Alias, MP of Jelebu, which was held at Klana Resort in Seremban, Negeri

[30] Adam A.B., "Dakwaan Langgar SOP: Polis Tak Boleh 'Hukum' Annuar Tanpa Arahan Pejabat Peguam Negara", *Free Malaysia Today*, 17 February 2021, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/bahasa/tempatan/2021/02/17/dakwaan-langgar-sop-polis-tak-boleh-hukum-annuar-tanpa-arahan-pejabat-peguam-negara/

[31] I. Leong, "PKPP: Kompaun Akan Dikeluarkan Serta-Merta di Lokasi—Ismail Sabri", *Astro AWANI*, 7 October 2020, https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/pkpp-kompaun-akan-dikeluarkan-sertamerta-di-lokasi-ismail-sabri-262566

Figure 2: Memes from Fahmi Reza's tweet on 9 February 2021, https://twitter.com/kuasasiswa/ status/1358963223932805123

Sembilan. Twitterjaya was abuzz with pictures of ministers based in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur who had travelled to Negeri Sembilan to attend the wedding reception and contrasted these with a Health Ministry notification about the inter-state travel ban (see Figure 4).

Other issues that kept the #AntaraDuaDarjat hashtag alive was the arrest of graphic artist Fahmi Reza. On 4 May, he tweeted that *orang kayangan* were politely invited to the police station for investigations, while twenty policemen invaded his apartment to arrest and handcuff him before hauling him to the police station because he was *orang miskin*

Figure 4: Pictures of ministers attending the wedding reception of an MP's daughter in another state went viral on Twitter in contrast to the Health Ministry's announcement that inter-state travel was not allowed

(poor person). It garnered 3,385 retweets and 5,385 likes.[32] Twitter users noticed the disparity between the then fourteen-day quarantine period for normal citizens returning from overseas versus the short duration for ministers, one of whom was Minister of International Trade and Industry Azmin Ali (see Figure 5).

The emergence and virality of #AntaraDuaDarjat and its iterations on Twitter laid bare the socio-economic fault lines in Malaysian society. Prior to the pandemic, Malaysian society was often divided along the lines of race, language and religion. However, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated income inequality in Malaysia as its economy shrank by 5.6 per cent in 2020, the worst since the 7.4 per cent contraction during the 1998 Asian financial crisis.[33] Unemployment increased to 4.8 per cent in June 2021 (768,700 persons) up from 4.5 per cent (728,100 persons) the previous month.[34] The Department of Statistics Malaysia's Household Income Estimates and Incidence of Poverty Report showed that the number of poor households rose from 405,400 in 2019 to 639,800 in 2020, while the incidence of absolute poverty hiked from 5.6 per cent in 2019 to 8.4 per cent in 2020. The crisis also caused 20 per cent of middle-income households (M40) to drop into the 40 per cent bottom-income group (B40).[35]

The economic consequences of COVID-19 affected all ethnic communities in Malaysia, regardless of race, language or religion. There was a growing realization among Malaysians that it was the political and

[32] https://twitter.com/kuasasiswa/status/1389399344432836610?s=20

[33] P. Prem Kumar, "Malaysia's GDP Shrinks 5.6% in COVID-marred 2020", *Nikkei Asia*, 11 February 2021, https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Malaysia-s-GDP-shrinks-5.6-in-COVID-marred-2020

[34] *Malay Mail*, "Statistics Dept: Malaysia's Unemployment Rate Rises to 4.8pc in June 2021", 9 August 2021, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/08/09/statistics-dept-malaysias-unemployment-rate-rises-to-4.8pc-in-june-2021/1996405

[35] Bernama, "COVID-19 Pandemic Has Significant Impact on Household Income, Study Reveals", *The Edge Markets*, 6 August 2021, https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/covid19-pandemic-has-significant-impact-household-income-study-reveals

Figure 5: Viral tweets about the shorter quarantine period for ministers returning from overseas as compared to normal citizens

economic elites who were controlling and benefiting from their access to resources in society, and not any certain ethnic group, which was the narrative that has been peddled for decades in the country. The narratives associated with hashtag #AntaraDuaDarjat indicated that Malaysians were becoming more aware that despite differences in race, religion or language, they actually faced similar bread and butter issues in a system that is dominated by privileged elites.

#DengkiKe

The simmering resentment over double standards in SOP enforcements during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in unusually negative reactions from the public about the Malaysian Queen's remark of "Dengki ke" (Are you jealous) on her Instagram account when asked if her chefs had been vaccinated. At that time, many Malaysians had not yet been vaccinated, and there were reports that the Malaysian King, his family, relatives and associates had received supplies of Sinopharm vaccines—which then had not been approved for use in Malaysia—during a state visit to the United Arab Emirates.

Her comment sparked anger and outrage in Twitterjaya which used the #DengkiKe hashtag to highlight how members of the royalty were allegedly vaccinated before other high-risk Malaysians, and with vaccines that had not undergone due process.[36] They were also upset with her perceived callousness to the people's sufferings. Figure 6 shows that #DengkiKe started appearing on Twitter from 20 April and peaked on 21 April with some 62,700 Twitter users mentioning the #DengkiKe hashtag 196,000 times, which potentially reached some 20 million followers. Of these mentions, there were 6,480 original tweets that were retweeted 151,000 times. With #DengkiKe gone viral, the Queen temporarily deactivated her Instagram account. The hashtag lasted for thirteen days before fading off. Being a quick reaction to a one-off incident, the lifespan of the hashtag was limited.
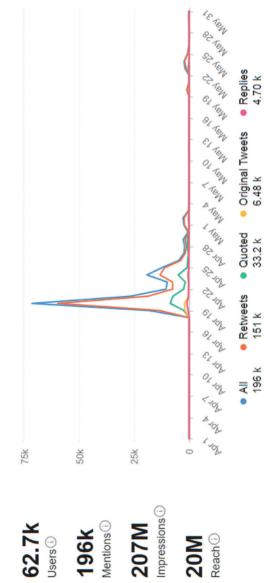
This hashtag campaign, although short-lived, was significant as such criticisms against royalty are unusual in Malaysia where the royal institution is held in high regard, especially within the Malay-Muslim community. That netizens boldly used their personal Twitter accounts to tweet #DengkiKe was unprecedented, given that they were aware of the severe legal consequences of their comments breaching the Sedition

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[36] *The Vibes*, "#DengkiKe Trending Hashtag Manifestation of Malaysians' Frustration", 20 April 2021, https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/24577/dengkike-trending-hashtag-manifestation-of-malaysians-frustration

Figure 6: Twitter metrics reveals the extent of buzz created by hashtag #DengkiKe from 1 April to 1 June 2021

Twitter Metrics for #Dengkike

62.7k
Users ⓘ

196k
Mentions ⓘ

207M
Impressions ⓘ

20M
Reach ⓘ

● All — 196 k ● Retweets — 151 k ● Quoted — 33.2 k ● Original Tweets — 6.48 k ● Replies — 4.70 k

Apr 1, Apr 4, Apr 7, Apr 10, Apr 13, Apr 16, Apr 19, Apr 22, Apr 25, Apr 28, May 1, May 4, May 7, May 10, May 13, May 16, May 19, May 22, May 25, May 28, May 31

Act. In fact, activist lawyer Azira Aziz even shared a contact list of legal aid centres in every state if the authorities acted against anyone who criticized the government or monarch on social media.[37] It was thus surprising that Twitterjaya threw caution to the wind—an indicator of the pent-up anger among netizens under lockdown.

The people's frustration caught the attention of graphic artist cum activist Fahmi Reza, who created a six-hour Spotify playlist based on the title "This is Dengki Ke?" consisting of songs that contained words such as "jealous" or "dengki" in the title or lyrics or had similar themes. He was arrested and brought to the police station for investigation under the Sedition Act. Fortunately for him, the Attorney-General's Chambers decided a few months later, in August 2021, not to proceed with the prosecution.[38]

#KerajaanGagal #KerajaanBodoh #KerajaanZalim #KerajaanBangsat #KerajaanPembunuh

The growing public disenchantment with the government's handling of the COVID-19 situation and the consequent economic fallout can be seen in the increasingly negative hashtags: #KerajaanGagal (#FailedGovernment), #KerajaanBodoh (#StupidGovernment), #KerajaanZalim (#CruelGovernment), #KerajaanBangsat (#BastardGovernment), and #KerajaanPembunuh (#MurdererGovernment). While the hashtags #AntaraDuaDarjat and #DengkiKe reflected the public's statement of their unhappiness with the situation, these subsequent hashtags outwardly accused the government of failing its citizens and causing untold misery. This was because the daily number of COVID-19 cases kept rising

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[37] Ibid.

[38] *Malaysiakini*, "No Further Action for Fahmi Reza's #Dengkike Sedition Case", 24 August 2021, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/588495

despite the population having lived under the second and third MCOs since mid-January 2021. From 2,985 new cases in 13 January 2021,[39] the number rose to 17,786 in 31 July 2021.[40] As can be seen from Figure 7, the hashtag #KerajaanGagal peaked on 16 April 2021 because there were 2,148 new cases the day before—the highest in six weeks since 5 March 2021.[41] Malaysian Twitter users were quick to recall a graphic which was previously released by the Ministry of Health to reflect the situation on 8 July 2020 when there were zero COVID-19 cases in Malaysia compared to 15 April 2021 (see Figure 8); they blamed the government for holding the Sabah state election which they believed caused the increase in COVID-19 cases.

Data from ISEAS show that in total, there were 242,000 Twitter users who mentioned #KerajaanGagal 1.42 million times, thus potentially reaching some 54.7 million viewers (see Figure 7). Of these, there were 80,800 thousand original tweets that were retweeted 920,000 times over only four months. The scope of #KerajaanGagal was greater than #DengkiKe, which was just a reaction to a one-off situation. The former's continuous appearance on Twitter was due to public outrage at the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis, especially the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) which allowed certain factories, businesses, and industries to operate on the basis of

[39] *Channel NewsAsia*, "Malaysia Reports 2,985 New COVID-19 Cases as Renewed Movement Curbs Take Effect", 13 January 2021, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/Covid-19-malaysia-2985-new-cases-mco-travel-selangor-johor-403906

[40] J. Lim, "COVID-19: Daily Cases Hit New High of 17,786 on July 31, with Four States Reporting Four-Digit Infections", *The Edge Markets,* 31 July 2021, https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/malaysias-daily-covid19-cases-rise-17786-july-31

[41] A. Ram, "Malaysia's COVID-19 Infections Rise to Highest in Six Weeks", *Straits Times*, 16 April 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysias-daily-Covid-19-infections-rise-to-2148-highest-in-six-weeks
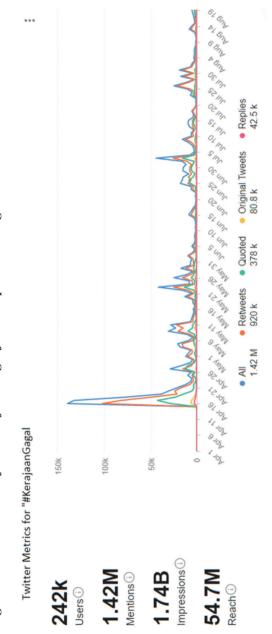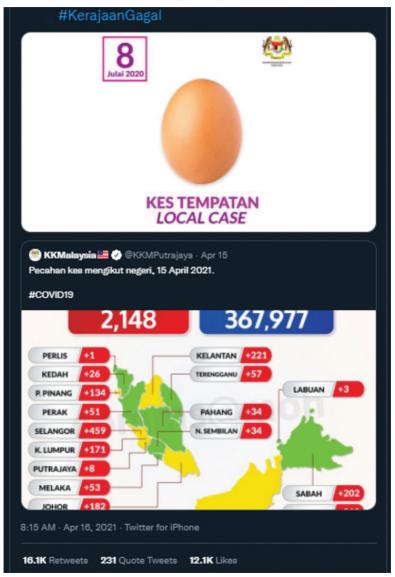
Figure 7: Twitter metrics for #KerajaanGagal from 1 April to 26 August 2021

Twitter Metrics for "#KerajaanGagal"

242k
Users ⓘ

1.42M
Mentions ⓘ

1.74B
Impressions ⓘ

54.7M
Reach ⓘ

- All 1.42 M
- Retweets 920 k
- Quoted 378 k
- Original Tweets 80.8 k
- Replies 42.5 k

Figure 8: Twitterjaya contrasted the Health Ministry's announcement of no local transmission of COVID-19 cases in July 2020 to 2,148 cases in April 2021

"essential services" despite them contributing to the number of daily COVID-19 cases.[42] In fact, the Chief Minister of Selangor admitted that factories contributed to 80 per cent of the clusters in the state.[43] Poor communication between the different government ministries also led to confusion about SOPs. When the third MCO was imposed on 12 May, workers who had MITI authorization letters were told by the police at roadblocks that their letters had to be stamped at police stations, despite the ministry's announcement on 7 May that this was unnecessary. The debacle saw MITI tweeting to the Malaysian police force, reiterating that stamps were unnecessary for workers to travel to work.[44] This example highlights the extent of disorganization between the ministries, such that they had to resort to using Twitter to communicate and clarify SOPs.

Meanwhile, Khairy Jamaluddin, then the coordinating minister for immunization, urged the National Security Council to review its COVID-19 protocols, especially on allowing Ramadhan bazaars to operate as it would be extremely hard for patrons to physically distance.[45] Twitterjaya was also unhappy with the expanded cabinet of seventy ministers and deputy ministers who did not seem to have a grip on the worsening COVID-19 situation (see Figure 9).

The escalation of public resentment can be seen from how the use of hashtags such as #AntaraDuaDarjat and #DengkiKe which were public observations, developed into forceful ones such as #KerajaanGagal and its various iterations, which publicly denounced the government for its ineptness in managing the COVID-19 situation. From being mere online

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[42] FMT Reporters, "Netizens Vent Anger as Cases Hit 5-Figure, Blaming Govt for Spike", *Free Malaysia Today*, 13 July 2021, https://www.freemalaysiatoday. com/category/nation/2021/07/13/netizens-vent-anger-as-cases-hit-5-figure-blaming-govt-for-spike/

[43] Farah S., "80 per cent of Clusters in Selangor Are from Factories, Says MB", *New Straits Times*, 30 June 2021, https://www.nst.com.my/news/ nation/2021/06/703860/80-cent-clusters-selangor-are-factories-says-mb

[44] *Malaysiakini*, "SOP confusion: Miti sends memo to cops—on Twitter", 10 May 2021, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/574063

[45] Ram, "Malaysia's COVID-19 Infections Rise to Highest in Six Weeks".

hashtag campaigns, the concept began to take root in the consciousness of Malaysians as emotions spilled over to offline action as posters and banners with #KerajaanGagal began emerging in Johor and Kelantan.[46]

A mob demonstration occurred around 2:00 a.m. on the first day of Hari Raya Aidilfitri when protestors used motorcycles and cars to block an intersection at Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Johor while setting off flares and displaying a banner with #KerajaanGagal. The same banner

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[46] Siti Hajar Husna C.H., "No Reports Yet but K'tan Cops Monitoring 'Kerajaan Gagal' Banners", *Malaysiakini*, 22 May 2021, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/575700

was subsequently found on a pedestrian crossing.[47] Two days earlier, the words Kerajaan Gagal were spray-painted in black and red on walls along the Malacca River.[48] Two months later in July 2021, a clothed humanoid figurine—clad in a white T-shirt, blue pants and straw hat—was found hanging on a flyover near the Malacca state government's administrative office, with the words *kerajaan pembunuh* written on the T-shirt.[49] Such incidences showed that the simmering anger online had resulted in some citizens displaying their feelings in the real world despite the risk of arrest. In fact, Malacca police have been trying to trace the persons behind the graffiti and figurine, while the Johor police have arrested twenty-seven persons for the demonstration in Parit Raja.[50]

#KitaJagaKita #RaykatJagaRakyat #BenderaPutih #BenderaHitam #Lawan

At the same time, instead of releasing their grievances through offline protests, there were netizens who chose to help others via welfare campaigns such as #KitaJagaKita (#WeTakeCareOfOurselves), #RakyatJagaRakyat (#CitizensTakeCareOfCitizens) and #BenderaPutih (#WhiteFlag).

The first hashtag #KitaJagaKita appeared at the start of the first MCO in March 2020 when award-winning author Hanna Alkaf decided to use her spare time to help people affected by the pandemic. On Twitter, she found several community groups and non-governmental organizations

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[47] *The Vibes,* "Incendiary Clips of 'Kerajaan Gagal' Mob Go Viral", 13 May 2021, https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/27296/incendiary-clips-of-kerajaan-gagal-mob-go-viral

[48] *Coconuts KL*, "'Failed Government' Graffiti Spotted Along Malacca River" 11 May 2021, https://coconuts.co/kl/news/failed-government-graffiti-spotted-along-malacca-river/

[49] *Malaysiakini*, "'Murderous Govt': Cloth Figurine Found Hanging on Malacca Flyover", 12 July 2021, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/582703

[50] Ibid.

that were helping the disadvantaged. She decided to use the hashtag #kitajagakita that she had previously seen and added these initiatives into the thread, which started gaining traction on Twitter. Her friend saw the Twitter thread, brainstormed with his friends, and they then created the website #kitajagakita.com within 24 hours.[51] The "one-stop shop" verifies and consolidates information about Malaysian civil society's COVID-19 efforts, and also matches individuals in need of corporate sponsors.[52] The website is now available as a mobile app.[53]

The hashtag lasted throughout the year as the pandemic continued (see Figure 10). Nevertheless, as the COVID-19 situation improved, the hashtag went on the back burner only to have a huge spike at the end of June 2021 during the third MCO as Malaysians felt the brunt of the economic lockdown. Food banks and food aid started emerging as Malaysians rose up to help each other, following the ethos of #KitaJagaKita. There were many posts on Twitter offering food aid and setting up food banks (see Figure 11).

It was around this time that another hashtag—#BenderaPutih—emerged. That campaign encouraged people who needed help to fly a white flag in front of their house as a signal if they were financially affected by the COVID-19 crisis so that the community could render them food aid and other assistance.[54] Figure 12 shows that #BenderaPutih

[51] T. Toh, "How a Malaysian Author and a Group of Volunteers Created the #kitajagakita initiative", *The Star*, 3 April 2020, https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/culture/2020/04/03/how-a-malaysian-author-and-a-group-of-volunteers-created-the-kitajagakita-initiative

[52] https://kitajagakita.com/pages/tentang-kami-about-us

[53] A. Yeoh, "Kita Jaga Malaysia Website Now Available as Mobile App", *The Star*, 21 July 2021, https://www.thestar.com.my/tech/tech-news/2021/07/21/kita-jaga-malaysia-website-now-available-as-mobile-app

[54] Hakimie Amrie H., "The White Flag Campaign—Where to Go 21", *Free Malaysia Today*, 26 July 2021, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/07/26/the-white-flag-campaign-where-to-go-21/?fbclid=IwAR2RLhe_TRDpGAJ3_r5AxrlVMS8jPo1cDvaLShZ9WnettzOBtkFnyN_QElc
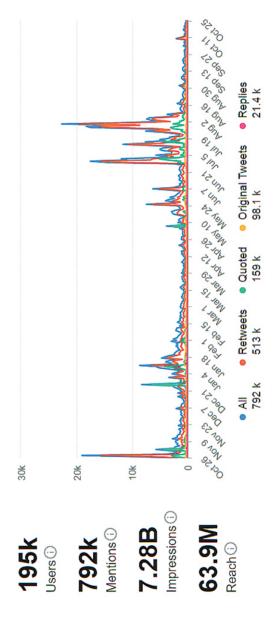
Figure 10: Twitter Metrics of #KitaJagaKita from 26 October 2020 to 25 October 2021

195k
Users ⓘ

792k
Mentions ⓘ

7.28B
Impressions ⓘ

63.9M
Reach ⓘ

All
792 k

Retweets
513 k

Quoted
159 k

Original Tweets
98.1 k

Replies
21.4 k

Figure 11: Offers of food aid went viral on Twitter

#KitaJagaKita #AllahJagaKita
Translate Tweet

6:58 PM · Jun 29, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

11.2K Retweets   **44** Quote Tweets   **3,108** Likes

peaked on 28 June 2021 and lasted approximately ten days with some 109,000 users mentioning the hashtag 261,000 times, reached a potential audience of 90.2 million people. The hashtag was successful in gaining assistance for those in need.

One of the earliest persons to have used the hashtag was Nik Faizah Nik Othman, deputy head of the women's wing in Kelantan of Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah). Also known as "Kak Jah" (Sister Jah), she said the idea emerged when she read news about the increasing number of suicide cases in Malaysia. She wanted to help people facing difficulties and thought that flying a white flag would enable those in the same vicinity to render aid to others in need. Initially, her aim was to alert people within her own community in Kelantan but she was pleasantly surprised to find that the idea had viralled on social media. In an interview
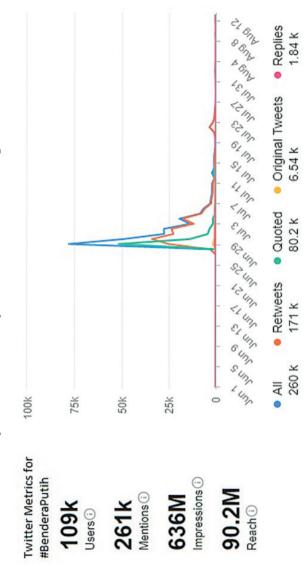
26

Figure 12: Twitter metrics for #BenderaPutih from 1 June 2021 to 15 August 2021

with *Sinar Harian*, she said that the white flag was not a political symbol and should not be politicized.[55]

Those who saw the #BenderaPutih posts were at first rather sceptical but decided to respond, out of desperation. Welder Zulkiflie Samsudin, 39, in Kangkar Pulai, Johor thought that hoisting a white flag could be a gimmick but took a chance; he had already lost almost half of his monthly income due to the pandemic and was unable to pay his rent and car loan, much less milk and diapers for his one-year-old son. Thanks to aid that came in, he settled his debts and could support his family for the next few months.[56] Food banks emerged as Malaysians rose to the challenge of helping their neighbours in need. A group of students created a web application called Sambal SOS to provide information for those who needed to locate food banks, or connect donors with those who had raised a white flag to request for aid.[57]

These grassroots movements caused some uneasiness among those in the corridors of power, however. For example, the Chief Minister of Kedah said that his administration would not help anyone who raised the white flag because he believed that the #BenderaPutih campaign was political propaganda aimed at painting the government in a bad light and implying that it had failed to help the people. In his view, those who needed help should call the official channel—the Disaster Control

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[55] Nurul Nabila A.H., "Kak Jah Pencetus Idea Bendera Putih", *Sinar Harian*, 5 July 2021, https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/148115/BERITA/Wawancara/Kak-Jah-pencetus-idea-bendera-putih

[56] FMT Reporters, "Welder Flies White Flag, and the White Knights Ride in", *Free Malaysia Today*, 29 June 2021, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/06/29/welder-flies-white-flag-and-the-white-knights-ride-in/?fbclid=IwAR1rqr54gGA-eqg8TbMCG3zbufKJ42xpvOMa5OBX06c81AQ9Wo7jYU5y4xE

[57] *Soyacincau*, "#BenderaPutih: University Students Create a Web App to Locate Food Banks and White Flags", 6 July 2021, https://soyacincau.com/2021/07/06/bendera-putih-sambal-sos-web-app-locate-food-banks-white-flags/?fbclid=IwAR0go8QupM0QL-yd-tuG4_ktDZZLZDT4YaCMlH9yGfIphN3QkOxGAfdvZ9c

Operation Centre.[58] In Bukit Setongkol, Kuantan, several residents claimed that the police ordered them to remove the white flags placed in front of their houses, and they would be fined if they did not follow instructions.[59] The police later clarified that some white flags had been pinned on electric poles which was against the law, but they had not objected if flags were displayed without obstruction.[60]

Nevertheless, there were accusations in Twitterjaya that politicians and the government had "hijacked" the #kitajagakita concept for their own agenda. In fact, then PM Muhyiddin Yassin used the phrase Kita Jaga Kita in his April 2020 speech when he announced the MCO extension; it has since been frequently used in government public service announcements (PSA).[61] For example, the Health Ministry often uses the hashtag in its official announcements on Twitter (see Figure 13). And corporations such as Telekom Malaysia also used #KitaJagaKita in its tweets on Malaysia's performance during the Olympics (see Figure 14)[62] which was not the original spirit of the hashtag.

[58] R. Loheswar, "Report: Kedah MB Says Won't Recognise Those Who Raise White Flag for Help, Cites Propaganda Against Govt", *Malay Mail*, 1 July 2021, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/07/01/report-kedah-mb-says-wont-help-those-who-raise-white-flag-for-help-cites-pr/1986460

[59] J. Choong, "Report: Kuantan Residents Say Told to Remove White Flags by Community Leader, Cops", *Malay Mail*, 1 July 2021, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/07/01/report-kuantan-residents-say-told-to-remove-white-flags-by-community-leader/1986463

[60] P. Yiswaree, "Accused of Threatening Residents Flying White Flag, Pahang Cops Say They Were Pinned on Electric Pole", *Malay Mail*, 2 July 2021, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/07/02/accused-of-threatening-residents-flying-white-flag-pahang-cops-say-they-wer/1986555

[61] Akmal H., "#RakyatJagaRakyat Trends Online as Netizens Voice Concerns & Frustration on Covid-19", *The Rakyat Post*, 29 September 2020, https://www.therakyatpost.com/2020/09/29/rakyatjagarakyat-trends-online-as-netizens-voice-concerns-frustration-on-Covid-19/

[62] https://twitter.com/TeamMsia/status/1421460489083650049?s=20

Figure 13: https://twitter.com/KKMPutrajaya/
status/1321320083906383873

KKMalaysia 🇲🇾 ✓
@KKMPutrajaya
...

Pesanan @DGHisham kepada semua terutama di negeri-negeri yang dikenakan Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan Bersyarat (PKPB).

Kerjasama 'SEMUA' amat diperlukan untuk membantu negara memutuskan rantaian jangkitan #COVID19.

#KitaJagaKita
#KKMJagaKita
#KitaTeguhKitaMenang
Translate Tweet

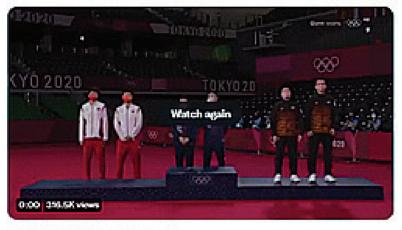1:17 PM · Oct 28, 2020 · Twitter for Android

Due to this development, the hashtag #RakyatJagaRakyat started trending instead as Malaysian Twitter users felt that #KitaJagaKita had been co-opted by politicians and the government for its propaganda.[63] Memes showing Malaysians taking up the mantle to solve social issues

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[63] Akmal H., "#RakyatJagaRakyat Trends Online as Netizens Voice Concerns & Frustration on Covid-19".

went viral on Twitter (see Figure 15). One Twitter user saluted a group of conscientious Malaysians who saw SOPs being breached at a vaccination centre in the morning and decided to set up crowd control measures using

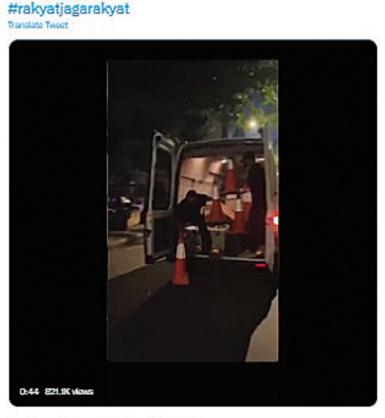*Figure 15: Memes of Malaysians solving social issues on their own went viral on Twitter*

traffic cones (see Figure 16). The #RakyatJagaRakyat also coincided with the #BenderaPutih movement and the hashtags were used in combination with #KitaJagaKita to signal that the ethos of all three hashtags was the

Figure 16: Picture of Malaysians who voluntarily set up crowd control measures at vaccination centres went viral on Twitter with hashtag #RakyatJagaRakyat

same (see Figure 17). However, data from ISEAS shows that this hashtag did not gain as much traction as #KitaJagaKita (see Figure 18).

Despite this positive outpouring of aid to alleviate the situation, some netizens were still incensed and enraged with the government's ineptitude which led to the emergence of the #BenderaHitam (#BlackFlag) and #Lawan (#Oppose) protests. These hashtags had stronger offline responses, inspiring protestors to rise up and state their opposition to the government. Figure 20 shows that #BenderaHitam started trending on 29 June 2021 with netizens being encouraged to share pictures of black flags on their social media sites to protest against the PN government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 19). Some 35,900 Twitter users mentioned #BenderaHitam 85,300 times, and potentially reached an audience of 20.7 million. There were 4,060 original tweets that were retweeted 66,400 times (see Figure 20).

#Lawan was also used in conjunction with #BenderaHitam to protest against the government. On 1 July, Sekretariat Solidariti Rakyat (SSR), a coalition of youth activists, used the hashtag #Lawan to call on the public to wave black flags on 3 July as a show of protest against the then PN government's failure to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. The group had three demands: The resignation of PM Muhyiddin, for Parliament

Figure 17: https://twitter.com/hannaalkaf/
status/1410551720422244359?s=20

Hanna Alkaf
@hannaalkaf   ...

📌 Thread of #BenderaPutih initiatives, so you know where to go for help.

#KitaJagaKita
#RakyatJagaRakyat

6:51 PM · Jul 1, 2021 · Twitter Web App

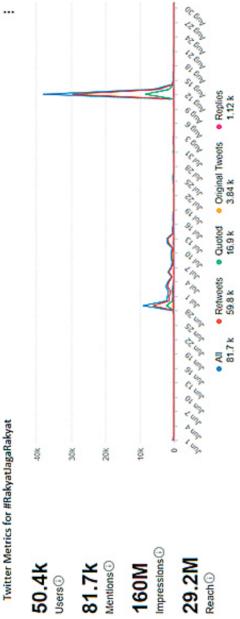**1,596** Retweets   **29** Quote Tweets   **839** Likes

Figure 18: Twitter metrics for #RakyatJagaRakyat from 1 June to 31 August 2021

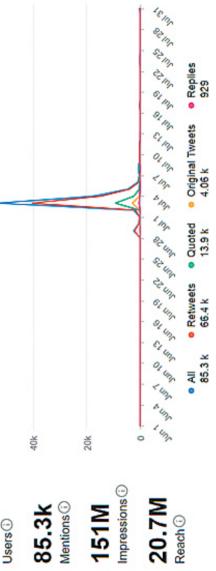*Figure 19: Pictures of black flags being flown with hashtag #Lawan*

Figure 20: Twitter metrics for #BenderaHitam from 1 June to 31 July 2021

to convene, and for the state of emergency to be lifted.[64] Thus, it is unsurprising that #BenderaHitam and #Lawan spiked on 3 July 2021—the day of the virtual protest. This online campaign resonated with many netizens such as Ms Laila Mohd who hung a black flag at her home in Subang Jaya, Selangor to signify her unhappiness with the weak COVID-19 crisis management.[65] Hundreds of thousands of Malaysians also joined the online campaign by sharing pictures of black flags on various platforms. However, the buzz for #BenderaHitam dwindled after 7 July 2021 (see Figure 20).

Nevertheless, #Lawan still trended on Twitter since SSR used the hashtag to drum up publicity and support for the actual street protest on 31 July 2021, which resulted in a spike on that day (see Figure 21). #Lawan had greater traction in Twitterjaya compared to #BenderaHitam, with 238,000 users mentioning the hashtag 1.15 million times. There were 34,900 original tweets that were retweeted 871,000 times which potentially reached an audience of 46.9 million. Twitter was used by the protestors to create online buzz by generating live reports on what was happening on the ground (see Figure 22). During the rally, hundreds of masked protestors, dressed in black, marched peacefully in Kuala Lumpur to voice their anger against Muhyiddin. They carried placards, posters and black flags, chanted slogans such as "Hidup Rakyat" (Long Live the People) and sang the national anthem *Negaraku*.[66] Some even brought mock corpses to symbolize the high number of COVID-19 deaths which

[64] Faris F., "Police Investigating Black Flag Campaign on Social Media", *New Straits Times*, 4 July 2021, https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/07/704993/police-investigating-black- flag-campaign-social-media

[65] Nadirah H.R., "Malaysia Probes Black Flag Movement for Alleged Seditious Elements", *Straits Times*, 6 July 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-probes-black-flag-movement-for-alleged-seditious-elements

[66] Farah S., "#Lawan Rally Ends as Protesters Fail to Get Inside Dataran Merdeka", *New Straits Times*, 31 July 2021, https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/07/713474/lawan-rally-ends-protesters-fail-get-inside-dataran-merdeka

Figure 21: Twitter metrics for #Lawan from 1 June 2021 to 15 August 2021
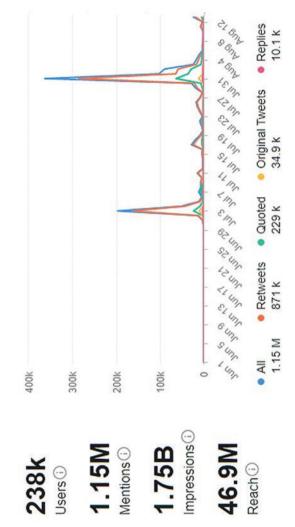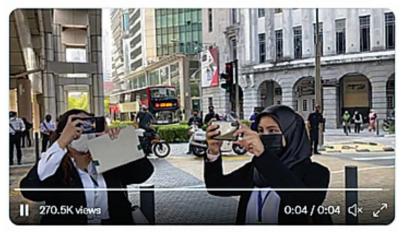
Twitter Metrics for #Lawan

Figure 22: https://twitter.com/Elill_E/
status/1421304493245755404?s=20

Elill ✓
@Elill_E

···

About 50 lawyers have been scattered around KL to
provide legal assistance for the protestors #LAWAN

⏸ 270.5K views   0:04 / 0:04 ◁× ↗

10:59 AM · Jul 31, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

13.5K Retweets   **759** Quote Tweets   **14.8K** Likes

they blamed on his government.[67] However, the protestors were unable
to enter Dataran Merdeka, the historic location where the announcement
of then Malaya's independence from the British was officially made, and
dispersed two hours later. When Muhyiddin resigned as prime minister

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[67] Hazlin H., "Protesters in Downtown Kuala Lumpur Demand PM Muhyiddin's
Resignation", *Straits Times*, 1 August 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/
asia/se-asia/protesters-gather-in-downtown-kuala-lumpur-to-demand-pm-
muhyiddin-to-step-down

on 16 August 2021, SSR called off the second protest, planned for 21 August 2021.[68]

A review of these hashtag campaigns that occurred in 2021 in Malaysia underscores the different factors that affected their longevity. #DengkiKe trended due to netizen's reactions to a one-off incident and after a week, the hype died down. On the other hand, #AntaraDuaDarjat and #KerajaanGagal continued to buzz on Twitter because of users' simmering discontent with double standards in SOP enforcement and the government's mishandling of Malaysia's COVID-19 situation. The first two hashtags—#AntaraDuaDarjat and #DengkiKe—were evaluative opinions about the authorities and can be seen as early warning indicators of public dissatisfaction among Malaysians. However, as their unhappiness was not sufficiently addressed by the government, stronger emotive and attacking hashtags appeared such as #KerajaanGagal and #KerajaanPembunuh, which went on to inspire offline protests on the ground, despite the risk of prosecution by the authorities. The pent-up anger and dissatisfaction were the affective factors that tipped the balance from online protests into offline demonstrations, especially when emotive action words such as #Lawan were used. Furthermore, #Lawan was specifically used by SSR to create publicity and garner as much support as possible, unlike the other hashtags which had evolved organically. On the day of the protest, #Lawan peaked even higher as protestors reported what they experienced on the ground. The use of #Lawan was cyclical: First, to generate online publicity and encourage Malaysians to join an offline protest and subsequently, to report ground activities to the online audience. Also, the virality and momentum of a hashtag can increase if it is promoted by politicians with strong social media presence such as Syed Saddiq, who tweeted #Lawan 224 times to his 1 million followers (see Figure 23).

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[68] *The Vibes*, "#Lawan Protest Off Now That Muhyiddin Has Quit", 19 August 2021, https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/38843/aug-21-lawan-protest-off-now-that-muhyiddin-has-quit

Figure 23: Twitter users with the most followers and reach who were tweeting #Lawan from 1 June to 13 August 2021

Top Twitter Authors ⓘ   ⋮

	Author	Tweets	Followers
1	@501awani	9	2M
2	@staronline	15	2M
3	@malaysiakini	34	1M
4	@anwaribrahim	23	1M
5	@hmetromy	8	1M
6	@n_izzah	2	1M
7	@syedsaddiq	224	1M
8	@typicalmsian	2	1M
9	@bernamadotcom	9	946k
10	@harithiskander	4	892k

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the prolonged MCOs since March 2020 have had a tremendous impact on all aspects of Malaysian society—physical, psychological and financial. As of 20 August 2021, 13,713 COVID-19 deaths had been recorded. In the first quarter of 2021, there was an average of four suicide cases daily—336 cases, which was more than half of the 631 cases in 2020.[69] It is unsurprising therefore that the

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[69] FMT Reporters, "A Shocking Piece of Statistics—Four Suicide Cases a Day in the First Three Months", *Free Malaysia Today*, 29 June 2021, https://www. freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/06/29/a-shocking-statistic-four-suicide-cases-a-day-in-2021/

earlier hashtags #AntaraDuaDarjat, #DengiKe and #KerajaanGagal—manifestations of the increasing dissatisfaction among Malaysians—evolved into offline protests as the youth-led #BenderaHitam and #Lawan movement successfully mobilized many citizens to congregate on the streets of Kuala Lumpur despite concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic. All these online and offline protests had an impact on the embattled Muhyiddin administration. The negative public perception caused tremendous political pressure which led to his resignation on 16 August 2021 when he saw that he had lost support of the majority of MPs—the result that the #Lawan and #BenderaHitam campaigns wanted to achieve. His deputy Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob was sworn in on 21 August 2021 after claiming that he had the support of 114 out of 222 MPs.

This study into the hashtag campaigns in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored how online social media platforms have served as an outlet for citizens to express their feelings about socio-political issues and played a significant role in shaping and influencing political perceptions on the ground. Online hashtag campaigns that transform into offline protests publicized in the media can stir up public sentiments, which puts pressure on politicians and government. Online dissent that began with thousands of Twitter users tweeting a particular hashtag can evolve to millions of users using other more inflammatory hashtags. In the process, these hashtag campaigns do leave an impact the political process and the credibility and popularity of politicians.