



# COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Public health, social impacts, and political attitudes

Evidence from a survey of Indonesia,  
Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore  
and Thailand

**Policy Briefing – SEARBO**



Australian  
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## DISCLAIMER

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## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically transformed politics, economics and society in the past year. We zero in on the case of Southeast Asia through an online survey from mid-April to late May 2021 to examine how this global health emergency is shaping people's views on governance and health responses, among other matters.

Overall, we find populations in the region extremely anxious about the economic and public health impacts of the pandemic, although there are clear divergences on the intensity and manifestations of these anxieties across countries, and within countries according to demographic traits.

Here are some highlights of our findings.

1. Southeast Asian populations are deeply concerned about the effects of the pandemic in all aspects of their lives — from the health and safety of their loved ones to their economic well-being. Strong majorities across all five countries felt 'very worried' about the situation, with prolonged economic crisis and its impact on the poor causing the greatest anxieties.
2. Despite shared worries and anxieties, populations across the region diverge in their attitudes to pandemic policy, the effectiveness of government and health interventions, constraints on personal freedoms, and vaccination.
3. One dramatic variation in responses is in whether citizens felt more worried about the economic or public health aspects of the pandemic. In Thailand and Indonesia, a majority expressed greater concern with the economic effects, while a majority in Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore expressed greater concern over public health effects.
4. In all five countries, women tend to weigh public health as a bigger issue than the economic effects of the pandemic, although more women (except in Singapore) are 'very worried' than men about COVID-19's impact on personal economic security.
5. Respondents' economic vulnerability has a significant impact on how they experience and perceive many aspects of the pandemic. The region's most precarious citizens are the most anxious about the impact of the pandemic on the economy and their personal financial situation.
6. There is massive variation when it comes to satisfaction with national governments' pandemic response, from 85% in Singapore to 41% in the Philippines. Across the region, 80% think that relevant actors could have performed better at controlling the pandemic — particularly citizens.
7. Citizens are discerning when it comes to accepting constraints on individual freedoms. Many people accept curfews and the need for extra-parliamentary

policy interventions, but few are willing to endorse state attempts to muzzle a free and open press in the context of a pandemic emergency. Southeast Asian citizens are certainly not providing carte blanche to their governments to wind back civil liberties and political rights in response to the pandemic.

8. Nearly three-quarters of respondents in each country say they will seek vaccination when it's available, with the stark exception of the Philippines, where the figure rests at 66%. Across countries, people who are more financially secure and have more formal education are substantially more poised to seek vaccination.

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## Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread through Southeast Asia in early 2020, it has had devastating health impacts, as well as economic effects, on all countries of the region. Less visible, but nevertheless discernible, have been political and social consequences, with the pandemic strengthening authoritarian trends and heightening endemic societal tensions in most Southeast Asian countries.

At the same time, we see much variation in how each country has experienced the virus. Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, for example, responded relatively adroitly during the early stages of the health crisis, and earned plaudits internationally as among the world's best performers at containing the pandemic; all three have confronted serious setbacks since then, of differing severity. Other countries, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, have struggled to cope from the beginning. This variation is apparent in official data on the impacts of the pandemic (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, we know that these figures dramatically underestimate the true case numbers and death toll in some countries, especially where testing rates have remained low, as in Indonesia.

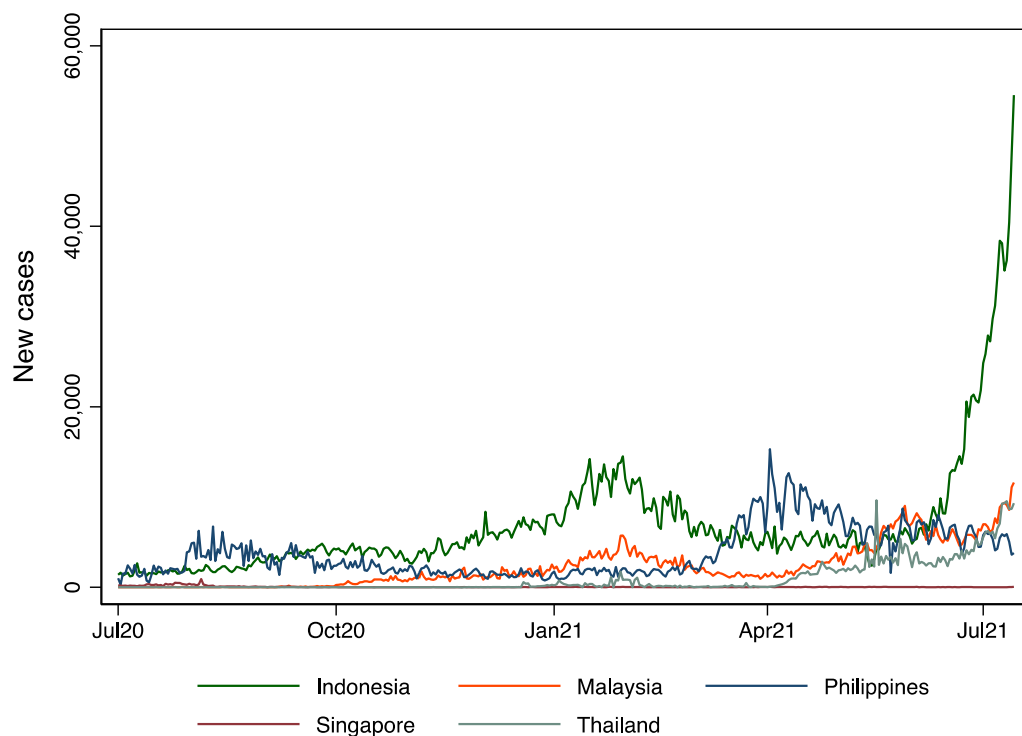


Figure 1. New daily COVID-19 cases, by country. Source: Our World in Data.

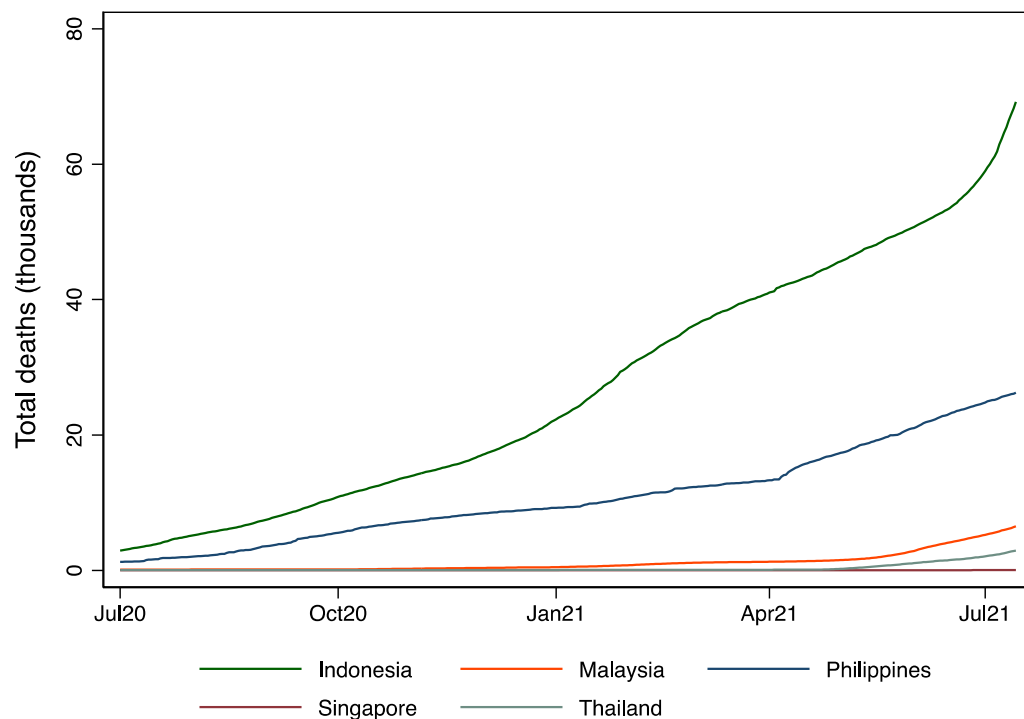
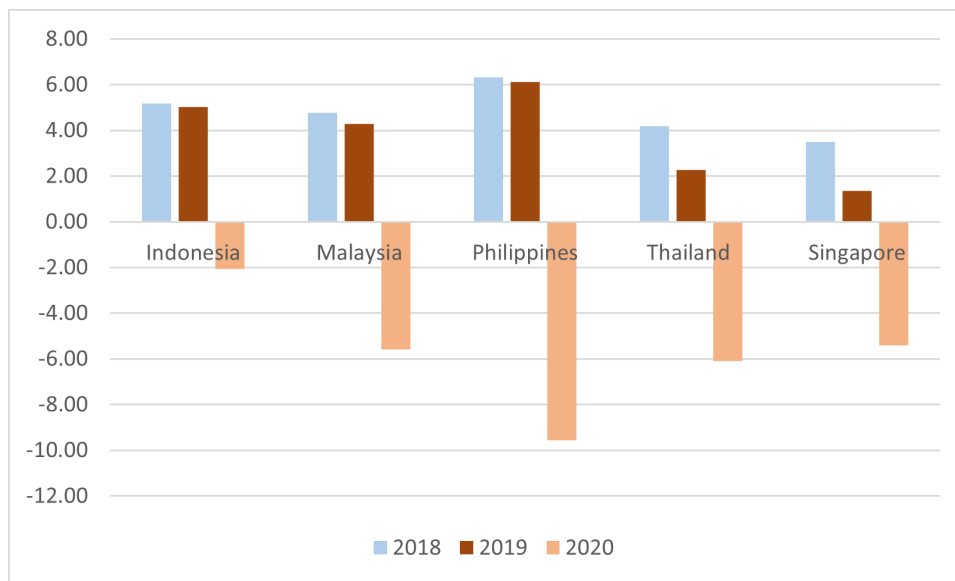


Figure 2. Total COVID-19 deaths, by country. Source: Our World in Data

The economic effects have also varied substantially across the region. As Figure 3 illustrates, all five countries experienced a dramatic economic contraction in 2020. The Philippines fared the worst, largely because of strict and extended lockdowns. In Indonesia, on the other hand, the Jokowi administration's approach was to let the virus spread and avoid large scale restrictions on mobility. The result was a more muted economic decline in 2020. By mid-2021, however, as the highly transmissible Delta variant spread throughout the region, parts of Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia went back into lockdown, and Indonesia was finally forced to do the same with its health system on the brink of collapse. With vaccine rates woefully low throughout most of Southeast Asia (except in Singapore), shutting down cities and restricting people's movement remains the most effective tool for containing Delta. Analysts thus warned that Southeast Asia's economic recovery would be far slower than anticipated, with countries such as Indonesia predicted to be especially hard hit.<sup>2</sup>



*Figure 3. GDP Growth by country (% annual). Source: World Bank national accounts data (2021)*

Meanwhile, there is a broad consensus that, politically, the pandemic has eroded democracy across the region. However, the manifestations of that decline span a wide range. While a rapidly growing scholarly literature tracks the varied effects of COVID-19 in particular Southeast Asian countries, relatively little work as yet systematically assesses the course of the pandemic and its political consequences across the region.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, there have been few attempts to compare what Southeast Asians think about the crisis, how citizens assess their respective governments' performance, and how the experience of COVID-19 is reshaping political attitudes around the region. In order to address such issues and study the health, social, economic and political impacts of the pandemic, and its effects on public opinion, we conducted an online survey across five countries of Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

Politically, these five countries are highly varied, though each of them falls into the hybrid zone between closed authoritarian regimes (found in Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam or military-ruled Myanmar) and liberal democracies, which combine elections with comprehensive protection of civil liberties (Timor-Leste is arguably the only existing example currently in Southeast Asia). The think tank Freedom House categorises four of the countries in our sample as being 'partly free', but they are in other ways very different. Singapore has one of the most successful and durable electoral authoritarian regimes in the world.<sup>4</sup> Indonesia and the Philippines are both electoral democracies that underwent democratic transitions in the 1980s and 1990s but are both now undergoing processes of democratic decline.<sup>5</sup> Malaysia experienced a democratic breakthrough election in 2018 after decades of rule by an authoritarian-inclined coalition led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). However, the successor coalition government collapsed in early 2020 to a 'parliamentary coup' that

ushered in a new coalition that includes UMNO. This new government has itself suffered inter-and intra-party rivalry, leaving Malaysian politics highly unstable throughout most of the COVID crisis; the country has spent much of 2021 under emergency rule, with parliament suspended.<sup>6</sup>

Thailand is the only country in our sample that Freedom House classifies as ‘unfree’ rather than ‘partly free’. Thailand experienced a military coup in 2014 (the thirteenth successful coup since 1932) and while it held elections in 2019, it did so with significant restrictions on opposition politics that persisted and even intensified after the election. Coup leader Prayut Chan-o-cha became Prime Minister, but faced a wave of student protests in 2020–21, in the midst of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

What does our survey tell us about the experience of the pandemic in this region of the world? Our results suggest, first, that Southeast Asian populations are deeply concerned about the effects of the pandemic on all parts of their lives, including the health and safety of their loved ones, as well as their economic wellbeing. At the same time, Southeast Asia’s citizens expressed a wide range of attitudes to pandemic policy problems, the effectiveness of government health interventions, new constraints on personal freedoms, and the COVID-19 vaccines. This report maps and explores these attitudes to the pandemic, and investigates the individual and country-level factors that might explain the variation we find.

Some of our major findings are unsurprising. For instance, the region’s most economically precarious citizens are the most anxious about the impact of the pandemic on the economy and their own personal financial situation. But these insecure citizens are also more anxious about health effects, about crime, and the consequences of the pandemic for individual freedom.

The data also provide new insight into how COVID-19 is shaping illiberal attitudes around the region. One striking conclusion we draw is that citizens are discerning when it comes to accepting constraints on individual freedoms. For example, many people accept curfews and the need for extra-parliamentary policy interventions, but few are willing to endorse state attempts to muzzle a free and open press in the context of a pandemic emergency.

In the remainder of this paper, we start by briefly explaining our survey and method. We then move through successive sections that explore what the survey tells us about, first, respondents’ chief worries about its potential effects; second, their evaluations of the effectiveness of their governments’ responses; and third, their support for authoritarian measures curtailing democratic rights in response to the pandemic.

## Introducing the survey

Between mid-April and late May 2021<sup>8</sup> — well over a year into the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia — we asked a total of 6,287 respondents in five countries<sup>9</sup> a set of 66 questions about the COVID-19 pandemic and how it was shaping their views of politics and society. The survey was conducted online given various health protocols that limit mobility and enforce social distancing, making face-to-face surveys difficult or impossible. We recruited respondents through the survey-research company Qualtrics and local contractors in the five countries; the respondents received small incentives for their participation. After learning about the survey topic and reading a disclaimer on confidentiality, respondents could volunteer to participate in the survey by accessing the questionnaire through their smartphones, tablets or personal computers, and could answer the questions in Indonesian for Indonesia; English, Mandarin or Malay for Malaysia and Singapore; English or Tagalog for the Philippines; and Thai for Thailand.

In terms of representativeness, the online format of the survey means the sample is skewed towards that section of the population in each country that has access to the internet and is comfortable using digital technology. Our respondents, therefore, are overall younger, better-educated and more tech-savvy than the general population, and non-random selection also means that individuals interested in the survey topic may have been more likely to participate. Our country samples are thus not fully representative of their respective populations, with the skew especially pronounced in Indonesia and the Philippines, given their lower rates of internet coverage. Nevertheless, the large number of responses collected helped ensure that our samples show sufficient heterogeneity to explore differences in attitudes across various social groups. Furthermore, while recruiting older and low-education respondents was challenging, our samples are more reflective of national populations on other important variables such as gender, ethnicity (for Malaysia and Singapore), religion (for Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand) and region within countries (for Malaysia and Singapore).

Another qualification concerns the timing. By June 2021, most of the countries of Southeast Asia began to experience dramatic second (or, in some cases, third) waves of COVID-19 infection associated with the spread of the Delta variant that had originated in India. In late June and early July, for example, Indonesia's health system, especially in Java, began to collapse under the weight of numbers. It is important to note that we conducted our survey mostly before the Delta variant began to sweep through the region, or at least at the early stages of this wave, as more than 94% of the respondents took the survey by the end of May. As with any public opinion poll, our findings represent a snapshot of one particular moment: evaluations of COVID severity, government ineffectiveness and the like might have shifted since our poll was conducted, especially in the worst-hit countries.

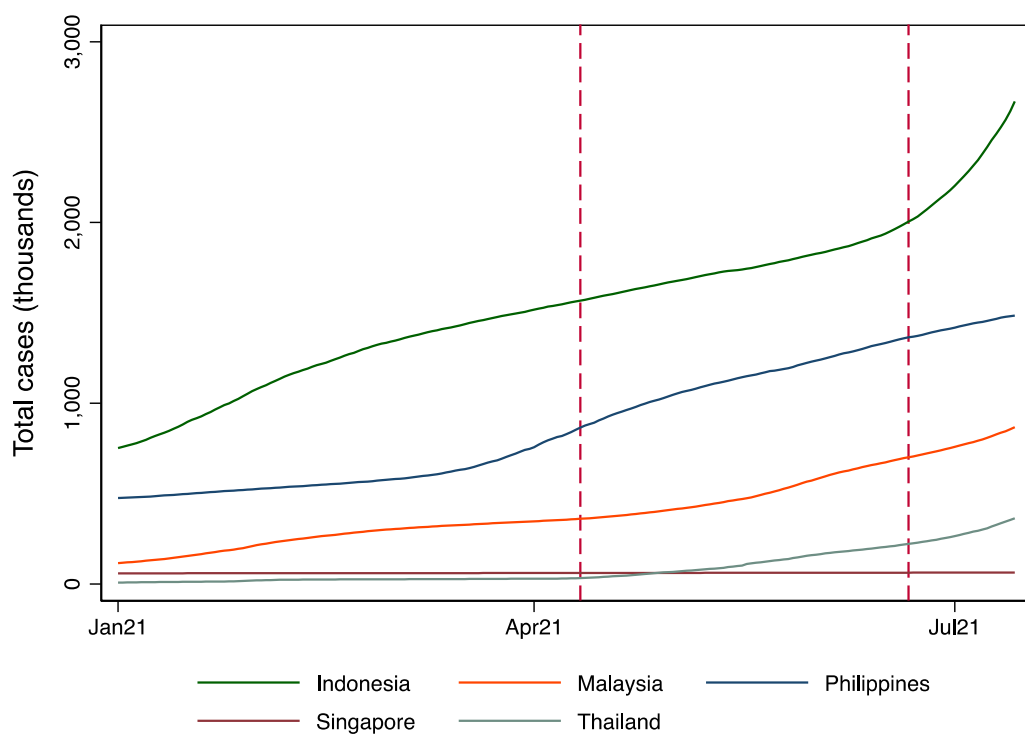


Figure 4. Survey fielding window and COVID-19 cases. Source: Our World in Data.

## Anxieties about COVID-19 and its impacts

Our survey reveals that the people of Southeast Asia are united across the region in expressing deep concern about virtually every aspect of the pandemic. We asked respondents how concerned they were about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on matters ranging from their personal health and economic conditions, to effects on children's education, welfare, crime, and personal rights. Across all five countries, strong majorities indicated that they were very or somewhat worried about each area, with often large proportions indicating they felt 'very worried' (Figures 5 and 6).

The issues causing the greatest anxiety in all countries were the prospects of a prolonged economic crisis and the impact on the poor. But respondents were far from sanguine even about the issues that elicited the least concern — for example a large minority in each country was 'very worried' about limitations to personal freedoms.

The variation across countries was relatively narrow: respondents from Indonesia expressed the highest degree of concern, with an average of 90% of responses to all questions in the 'somewhat worried' or 'very worried' categories; the least concerned respondents were in Singapore, with 73.6% of responses falling in these two categories. That disparity reflects the different level of contagion and crisis across countries (and, as we detail below, likely also different levels of confidence in their governments' handling of the crisis). For Malaysia the figure was 87.8%, for the Philippines 87.6% and for Thailand 82.6%. If there were any doubt on this score, our survey has revealed that the pandemic has generated widespread feelings of anxiety across the region.

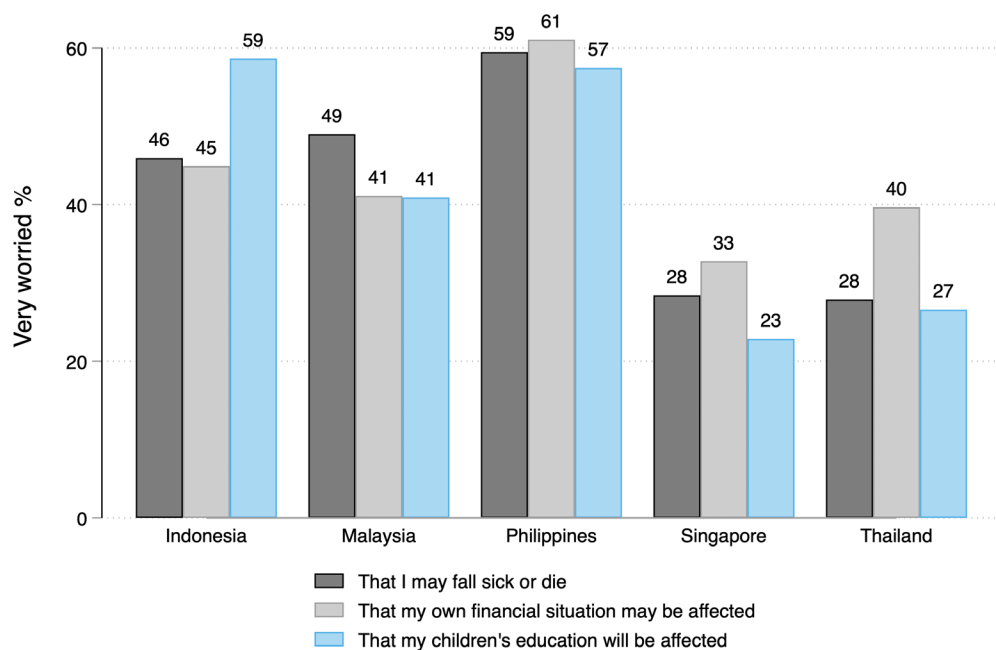


Figure 5. Share of respondents 'very worried' about COVID repercussions for their personal situation

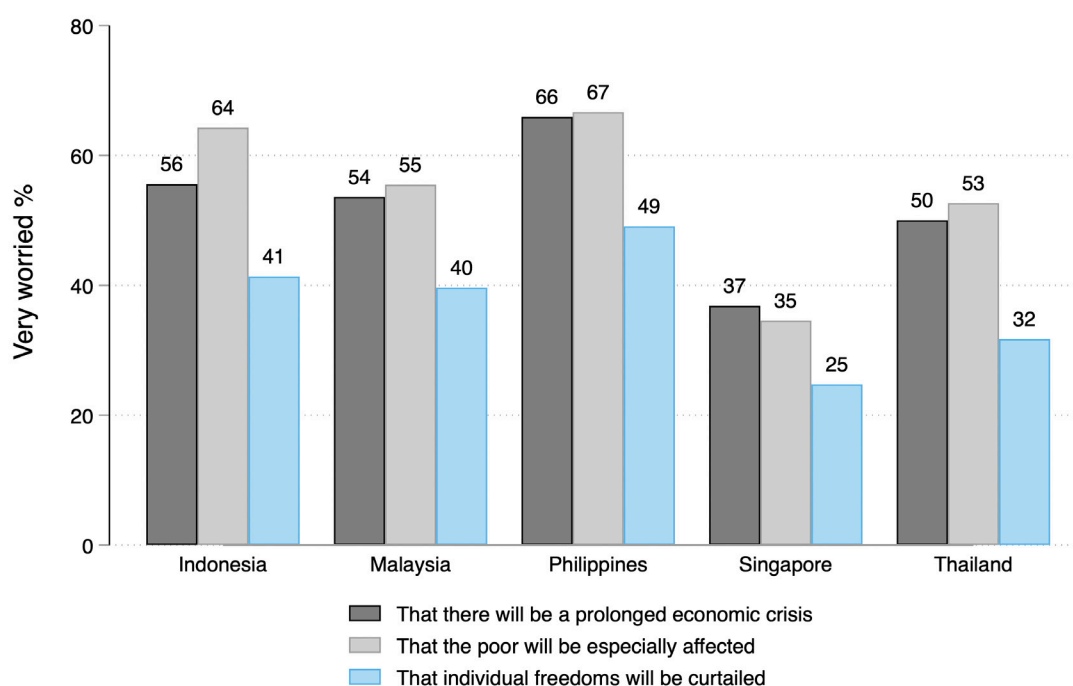


Figure 6. Share of respondents ‘very worried’ about COVID repercussions for society

One issue of critical importance, however, revealed a much starker split: whether people perceive the pandemic’s economic effects or public-health effects as the matter of greater concern. In Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, this has been a critical issue of public and policy debate from the start. While some governments (notably that in Indonesia) stressed that their major focus was on containing the economic impacts of the pandemic, others (such as that in Singapore) have emphasised controlling the spread of the virus as their key priority.

When we asked our survey participants whether the economic or public health aspects of the pandemic worried them more, we found dramatic variation across countries. In only two countries — Thailand and Indonesia — did a majority (71.7% and 57.7% respectively) express greater concern with the economic effects (Figure 7). Thailand has experienced one of the largest economic contractions in the region in terms of GDP, after the Philippines (recall Figure 3), and given that at the time of the survey, the number of official confirmed COVID-19 deaths was relatively low in Thailand, respondents’ greater concern for the pandemic’s economic damage is understandable. In Indonesia, on the other hand, the economic contraction has been, at least in relative terms, far less dramatic, whereas COVID-19 case numbers and the death toll have been much higher than in Thailand. Nevertheless, citizens here, too, mostly viewed the economy as their major concern — perhaps reflecting the government’s own stance, as we explain below.



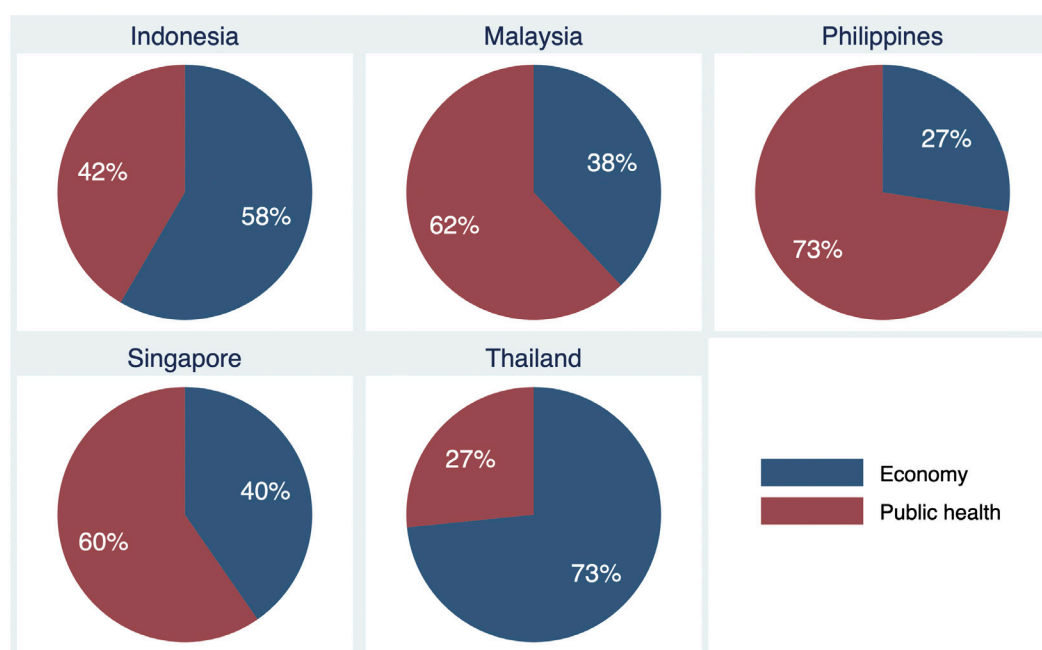


Figure 7. Which is the greater concern, the economic or public health repercussions of COVID-19?

The other three countries, in which a majority of respondents indicated they were most concerned about public-health dimensions, included Singapore, where the government had largely contained the virus, and the Philippines, which was almost as badly affected by the health crisis as Indonesia. It seems likely that this variation in responses reflects country-level differences, including pandemic conditions in the country concerned (notably relatively low infection and death rates in Thailand at the time of the survey) and responses to government cues, with respondents' picking up on government discourse about the pandemic. This last point pertains especially to Indonesia, where government officials from the president down frequently emphasised that the economic damage inflicted by widescale lockdowns constituted a more serious threat to Indonesian lives than letting the virus spread.

How did individual-level factors affect these levels of concern? What sort of variation emerges if we disaggregate our respondents according to other demographic and political attributes?

**Personal experience of COVID-19.** Strikingly, personal exposure to COVID-19 seems to have little impact on levels of concern about various aspects of the pandemic. We asked our respondents whether they knew someone who had contracted COVID-19, or who probably had COVID-19, in order to capture their relative level of personal proximity to the virus. Across neither our sample as a whole, nor broken down by country, did we find that people worry more about the economic or public-health impacts of the pandemic depending upon levels of exposure to and personal contact with the virus. For a range of other questions, we similarly found that personal contact with the virus had no

substantive impact on people's attitudes or preferences.

**Economic well-being.** On the other hand, one of the most striking findings of our survey is that respondents' economic status had a significant effect on how they perceived and experienced many aspects of the pandemic. Rather than trying to measure class status by objective measures such as income or household expenditures (which can be difficult to compare across five countries at very different levels of economic development), we use a more simple subjective measure of economic well-being, asking respondents about their financial condition in a typical month (with the options being, 'I make enough money to meet living expenses and to save', 'I make enough money to meet living expenses, but not to save', 'I barely make enough money to meet living expenses' and 'I need help to meet living expenses').

A consistent pattern was that the more economically insecure respondents were, the more likely they were to express concern about a whole range of issues. More economically secure people, by contrast, were consistently more optimistic (though still concerned) about the pandemic's potential impacts (Figures 8 and 9).

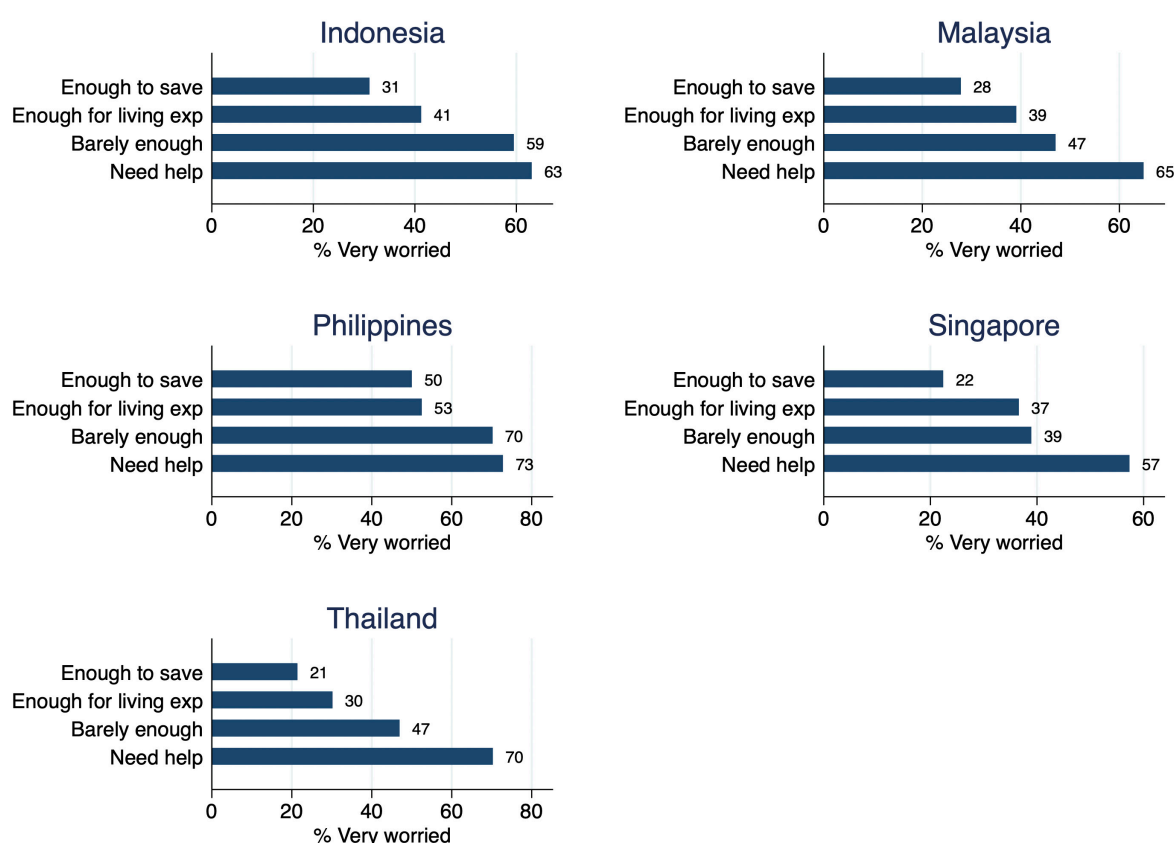


Figure 8. Share of respondents 'very worried' about negative repercussions for own financial condition, by income group

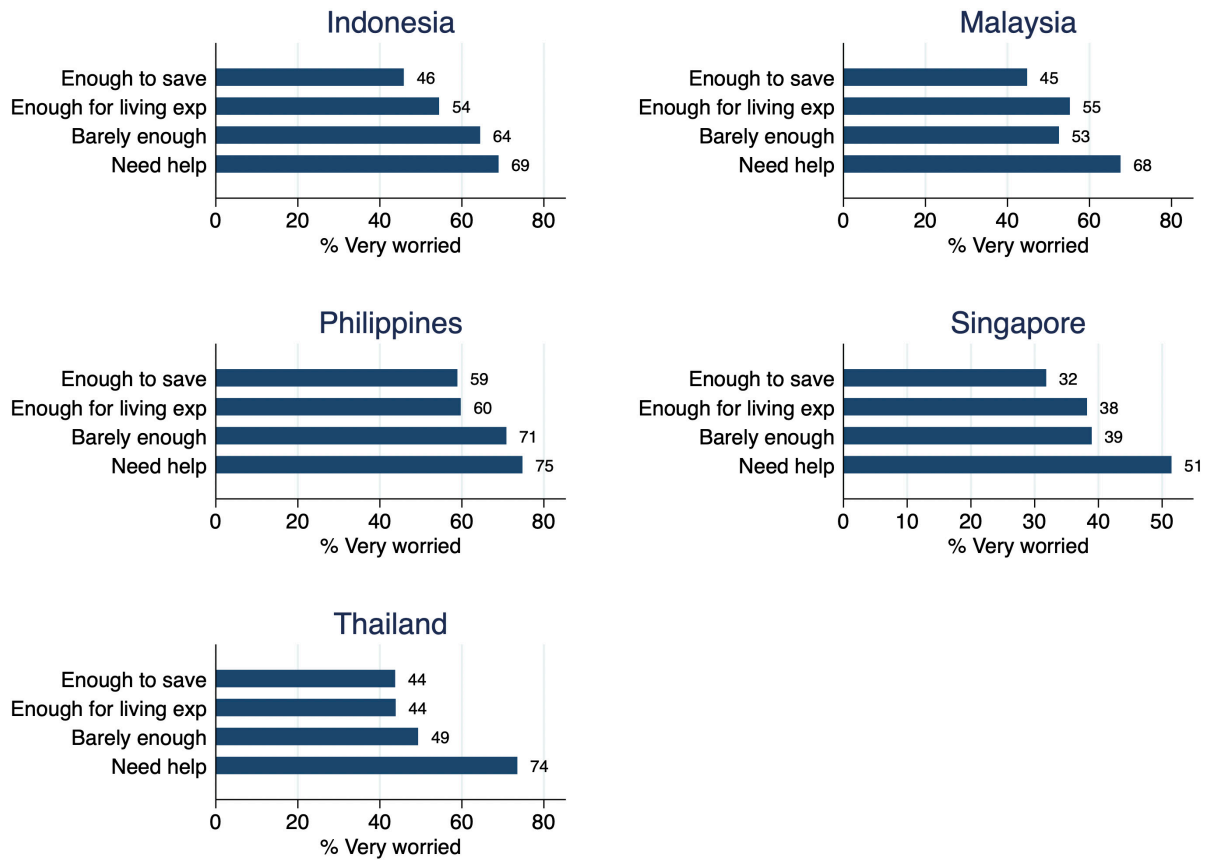


Figure 9. Share of respondents 'very worried' about a prolonged economic crisis, by income group

That economically precarious citizens feel the impact of the pandemic more acutely than economically secure citizens is unsurprising. Global research has shown that lower-income citizens, often working in contact-dependent service sectors, have suffered disproportionately.<sup>10</sup> For such populations, social distancing, staying home, home-schooling children, and accessing quality health care are far more difficult. But our survey offers at least some evidence that, across major Southeast Asian economies, people's pandemic anxieties across a range of problems, not just economic ones, are contingent upon their level of economic insecurity. For instance, respondents in our two less-secure quartiles for all five countries were more concerned than were financially more secure respondents about the effects of the pandemic on individual freedoms (Figure 10).

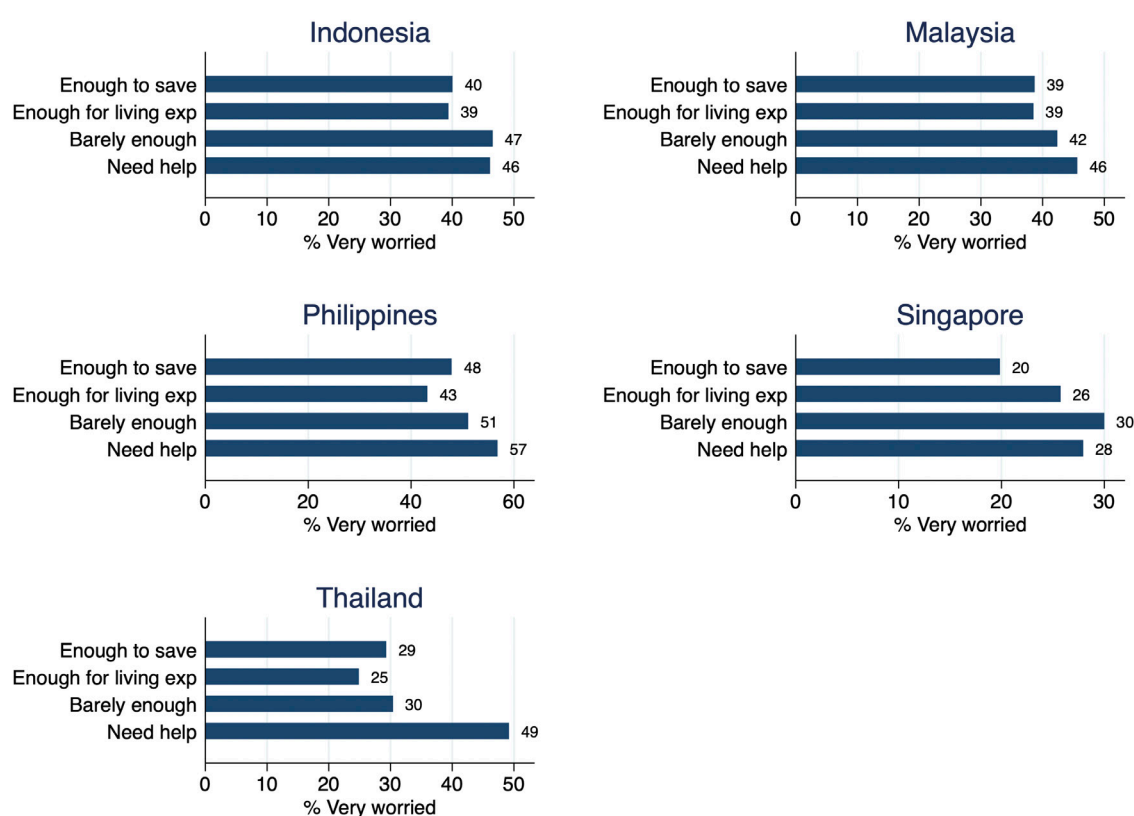


Figure 10. Share of respondents 'very worried' that individual freedoms may be curtailed, by income group

At the same time, economic precarity has different effects across countries when it comes to the question of concern over the economy versus health (Figure 11). In Thailand, respondents in all income categories saw the economic crisis as more pressing; respondents from the Philippines, Singapore, and (to a less dramatic extent) Malaysia all rated public health a more serious concern, regardless of their own economic situation. For the Philippines in particular, we suspect that this finding might be thrown off by the extent to which our sample under-represents lower-income respondents. In Malaysia and Singapore, tightly enforced lockdowns, coupled with well-publicised data on case-counts and public-health protocols, as well as comparatively generous financial relief packages, may have emphasised for citizens the public-health dimensions of the crisis while offering some reassurance of support in overcoming its economic externalities. In Indonesia, however, the correlation is striking — economically secure citizens view COVID-19 as a health problem, while precarious citizens overwhelmingly see the pandemic as an economic threat.

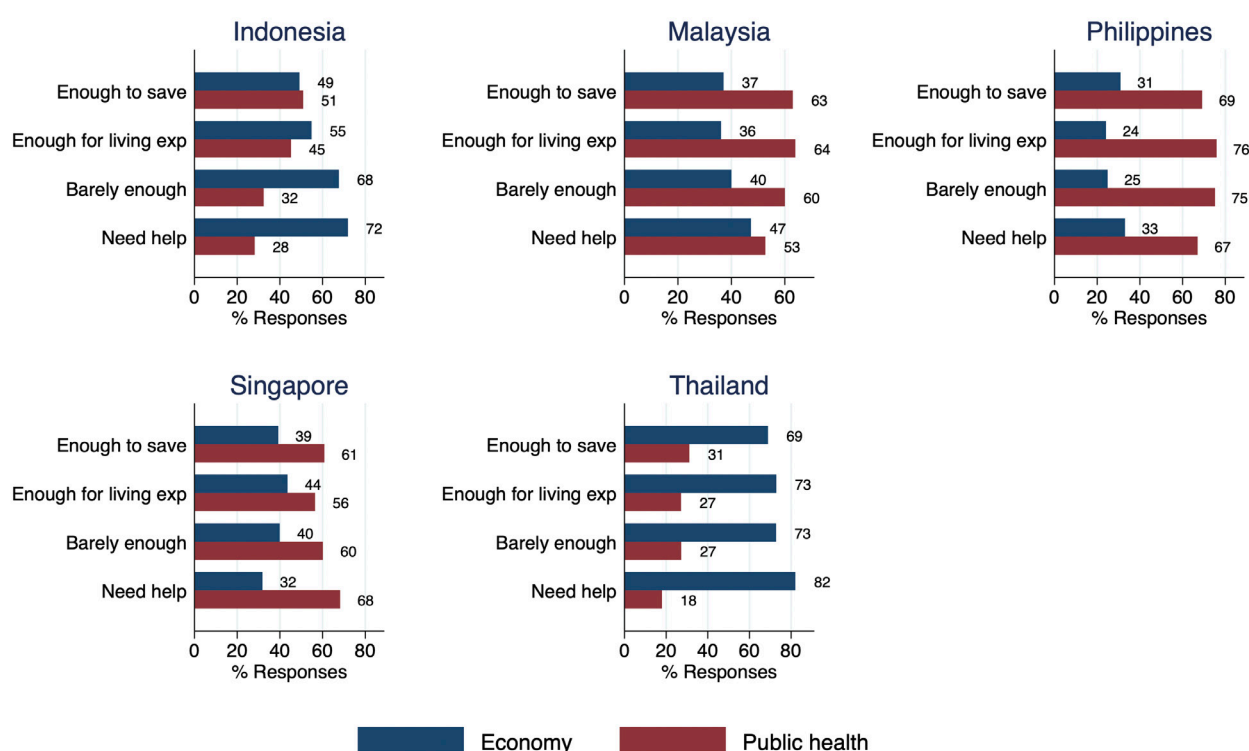


Figure 11. Which is the greater concern, the economic or public health repercussions of COVID-19? Breakdown by income group

**Gender.** In line with global findings of differential health, economic, and social effects of the pandemic,<sup>11</sup> we find, too, that women in Southeast Asia are generally more likely to be ‘very worried’ than men (in Singapore, merely equally so) about COVID-19’s impacts on their personal economic security (Figure 12).<sup>12</sup> At the same time, we note a clear gender effect in who considers the pandemic more a matter of public health or economics: in all five countries, women tend to weigh the public-health face slightly more heavily, and economic effects slightly less heavily, than do men (Figure 13). While these findings might seem contradictory we suggest that the quantum of women’s roles offers plausible insight. In these countries, as elsewhere, women not only navigated lost personal or household employment and the risks inherent in ‘essential’ service-sector labour through the pandemic, but they also assumed much of the burden of home-schooling children, of maintaining an always-home household, and of child- and elder-care. (Our survey confirmed that women took on a greater increased burden of household labour than men as a result of the pandemic.) They served, in other words, as household-level ‘front-line workers’ in managing the public-health crisis, so might be expected to be more attuned to that dimension than men.

Our findings are more mixed when it comes to concern for political implications such as curbs on individual freedoms: we see not only stark variation across countries in what proportion of respondents overall are ‘very worried’ about this possibility (highest in the Philippines and lowest in Singapore), but also in the gender divide (Figure 14). In electoral authoritarian Singapore and Malaysia, women and men are about equally

concerned; in the Philippines and Thailand, women are significantly more so; in Indonesia it is the reverse.

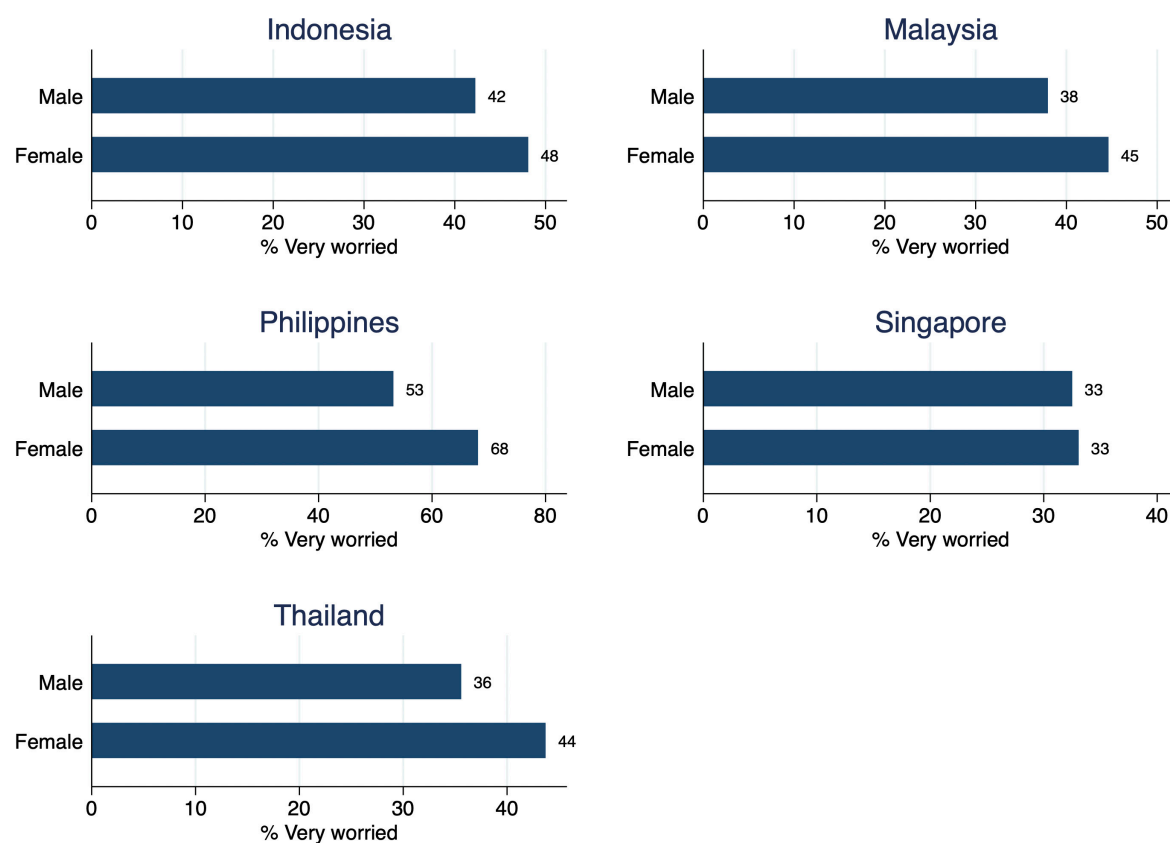


Figure 12. Share of respondents 'very worried' about negative repercussions on own financial condition, by gender.

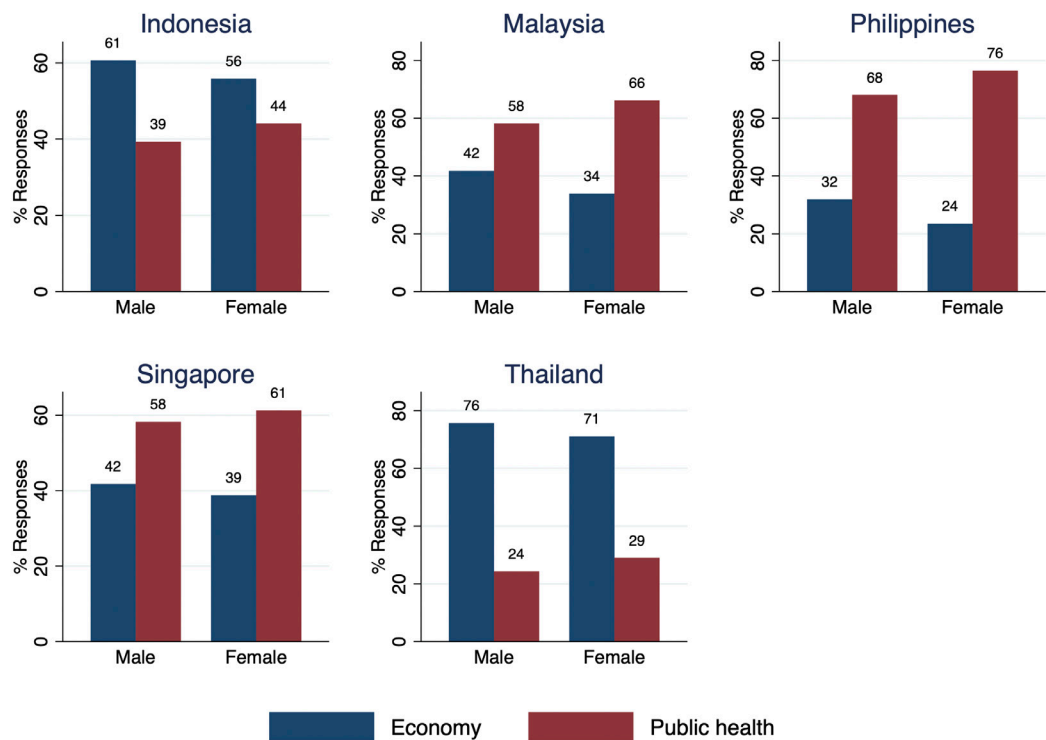


Figure 13. Which is the greater concern, the economic or public health repercussions of COVID-19? By gender.

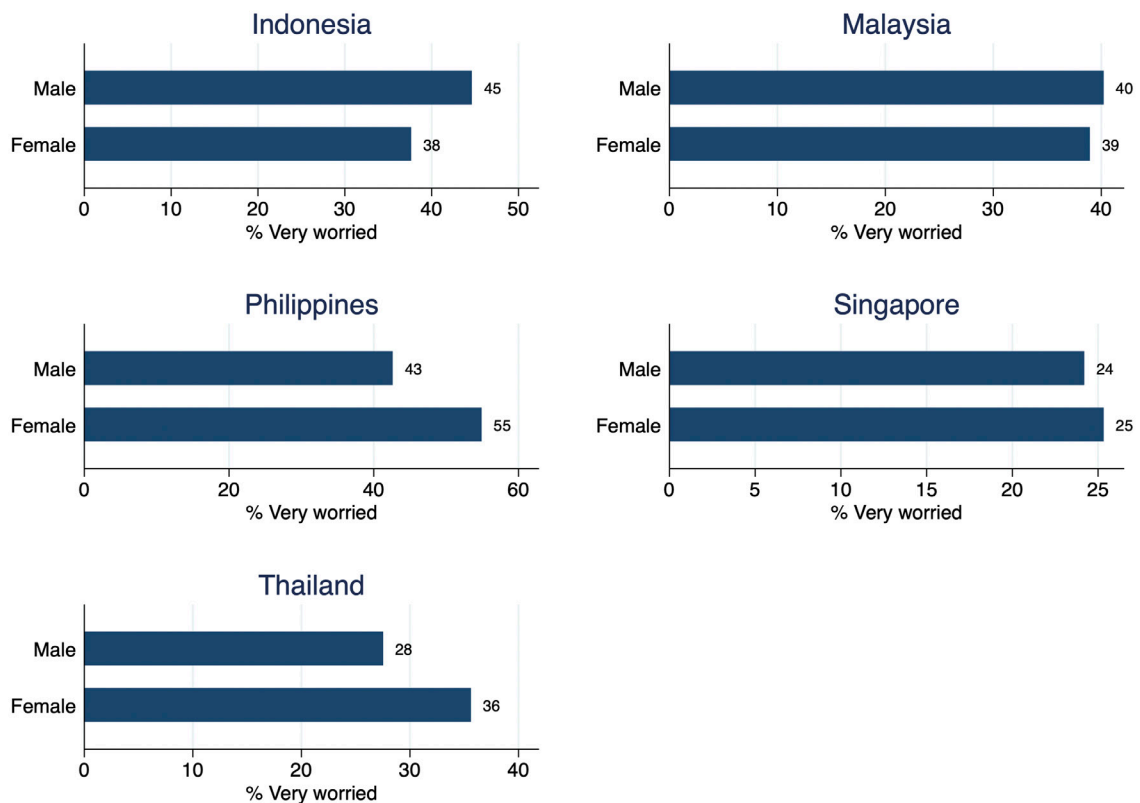


Figure 14. Share of respondents 'very worried' that individual freedoms may be curtailed, by gender

## Vaccine attitudes

As pandemic-management strategies have shifted increasingly toward vaccine distribution, we asked a battery of questions to gauge vaccine hesitancy: logistics aside, how much of an attitudinal hurdle can Southeast Asian governments expect to face in rolling out inoculation strategies? Here, we find relatively little variation overall across countries (Table 1): in the vicinity of three-quarters of respondents in each country say they will seek vaccination when it's available, and only 7–9% say they will not — with the stark exception of the Philippines. There, only two-thirds planned to be vaccinated. (Thai respondents were also slightly more equivocal than others.) That higher level of vaccine hesitancy in the Philippines most likely reflects distrust based on a dengue vaccine controversy in 2016, when the vaccine was blamed for several deaths. Although the scientific case against the vaccine was far from clear-cut, in light of major political and public controversy surrounding the vaccine, the Philippine government suspended the program, leaving a residue of vaccine mistrust.<sup>13</sup>

	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand	Total
Yes	76.54	77.54	66.02	75.17	71.02	73.69
No	7.77	7.19	16.02	9.16	7.13	9.23
Maybe	15.69	15.27	17.96	15.68	21.85	17.08
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 1. *If a vaccine becomes available to you, would you get vaccinated? (%)*

Nonetheless, we do see significant, if not massive, variation across population subgroups (Figure 15): most starkly, respondents who are more financially secure and had more years of formal education are substantially more willing to seek vaccination. Having been tested for COVID-19, regardless of the result, is likewise strongly correlated with willingness to be vaccinated, whether because these are individuals who suspect or know that they have come in contact with COVID-19 already and could do so again, or reflecting their generally greater trust in medical procedures. Having experienced the loss of someone close correlates with being at least open to the idea of vaccination — again, a logically unsurprising finding. (Despite women's greater propensity to frame the crisis as a public-health issue, we do not see a noticeable gender effect, though, in readiness to be vaccinated.)



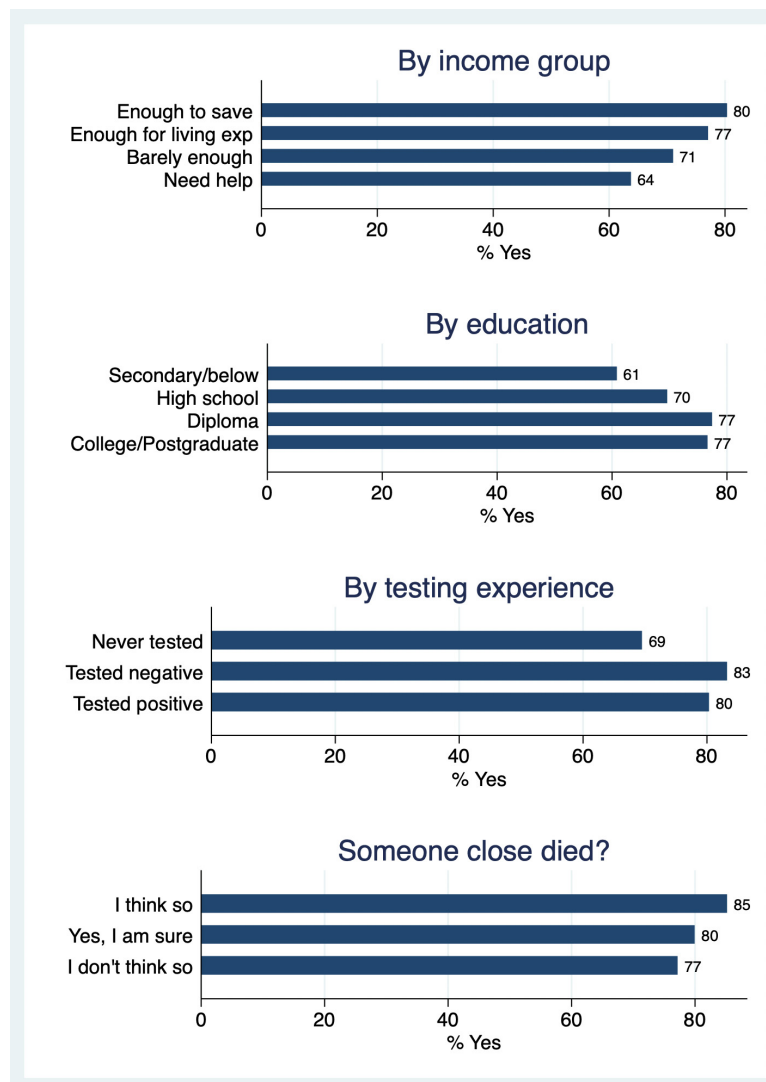


Figure 15. Propensity to get vaccinated in various groups of respondents (all countries)

Among those who said they did not wish to receive the vaccine, the most concerning issue is fear of possible side effects, followed by belief that a vaccine may not offer effective protection against the virus and general uncertainty that the risks associated with a vaccine would outweigh the costs (Figure 16). These suggest possible failings in public messaging about the safety, side effects, and efficacy of the available vaccines, a lack of support from the government and private sector for workers taking time off work should they experience side effects from the vaccine.

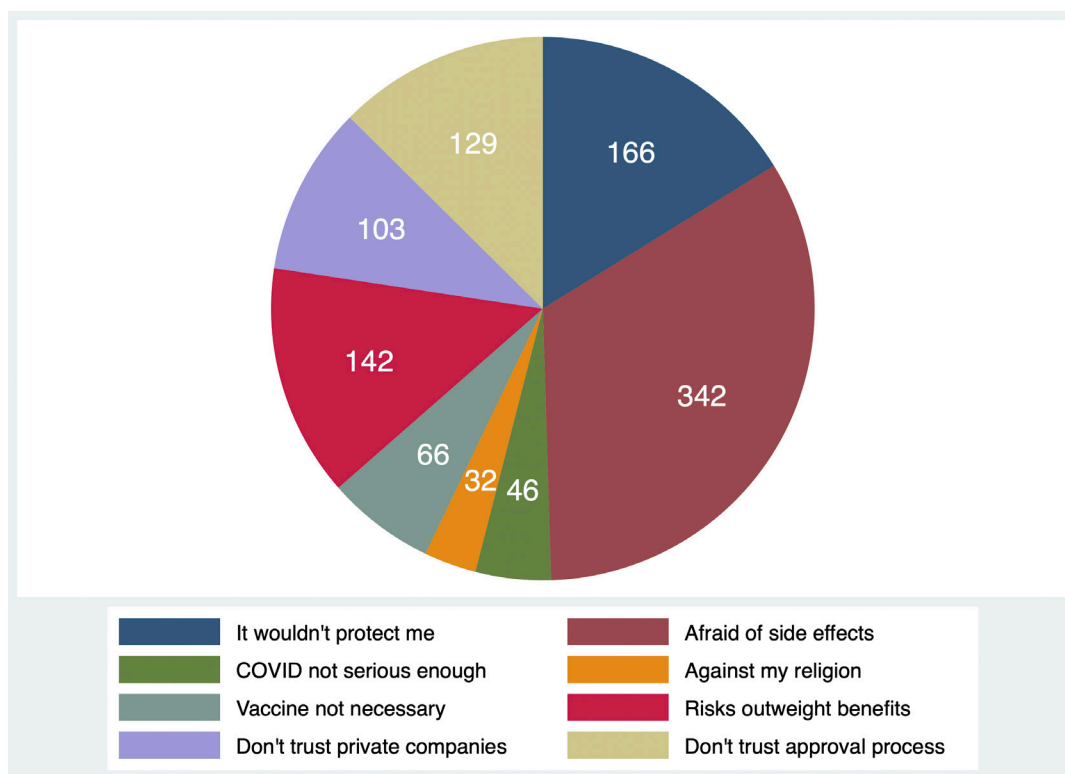


Figure 16. Reasons for vaccine hesitancy (total counts, all countries)

## Evaluating government performance and apportioning blame

We asked respondents a series of questions about how satisfied they were with their governments' responses to the crisis, and the degree to which they assigned blame for the pandemic to various actors. Answers to a simple measure of satisfaction with the national government response (Figure 17) showed substantial variation, ranging from 87% of Singaporeans stating they were either 'somewhat' or 'very' satisfied with their government's response, to only 43% and 46% in Thailand and the Philippines, respectively. These were the only two countries, however, in which a majority of citizens declared they were either 'very' or 'somewhat' dissatisfied. The net positive satisfaction (24%) in Indonesia is noteworthy, given that this was already one of the hardest-hit countries in Southeast Asia when our survey was conducted (we return to this puzzle below).

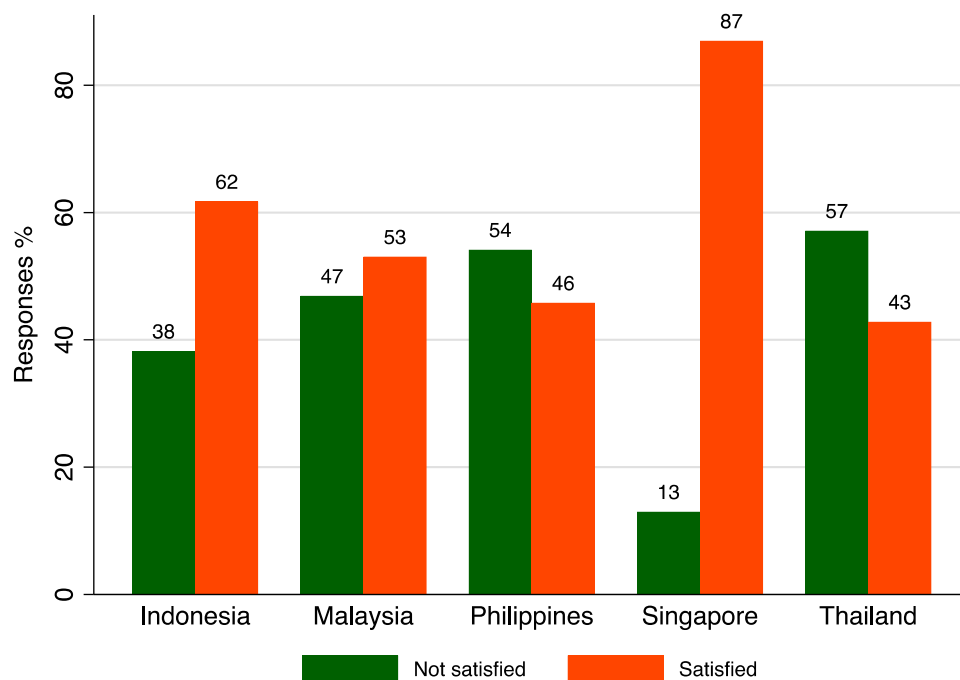


Figure 17. Overall satisfaction with national government response to COVID-19, by country

When we drill down into the different dimensions of each government's response (Figure 18), the pattern remains more or less the same: a large majority of Singaporeans express satisfaction with everything their government has done, from supporting the economy to preserving freedoms; in the Philippines and Thailand, most people are disappointed with the government on all fronts.

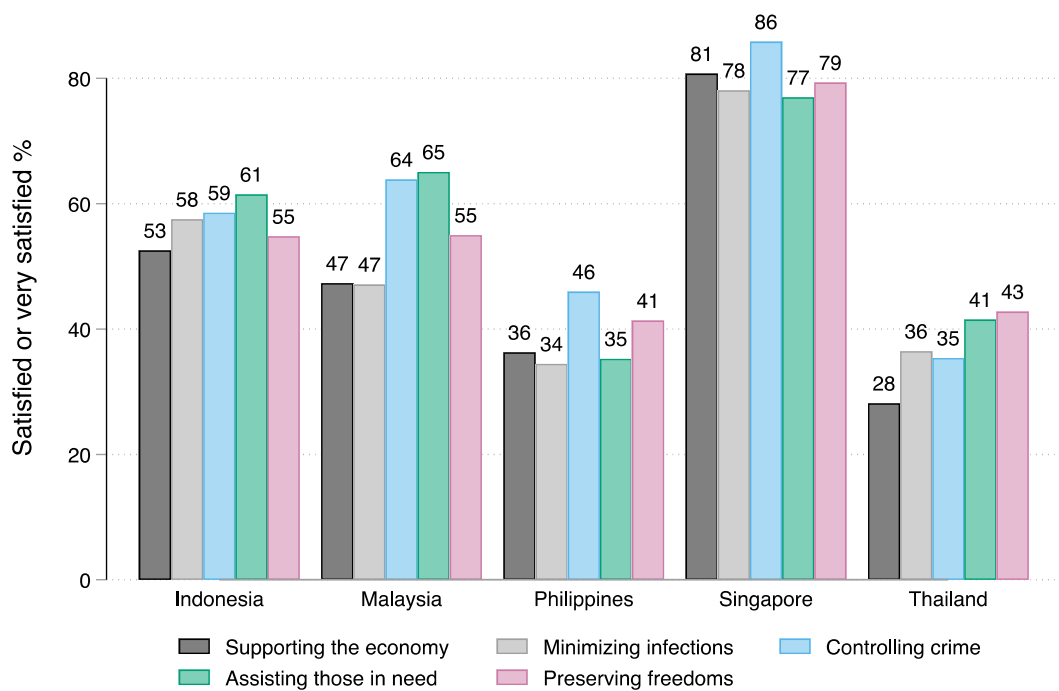


Figure 18. Satisfaction with government response in various policy areas, by country

Widely shared views that the handling of the pandemic could have been better, moreover, temper these varied levels of satisfaction. We asked respondents a series of questions about whether specific domestic actors (the national government, local government, health institutions, president or prime minister, citizens, and the government of China) could have done a better job at handling the pandemic. We found strikingly high levels of agreement across all five questions: in almost all cases, over 80% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the relevant actors could have performed better at controlling the pandemic. Figure 19 shows the breakdown of only those who ‘strongly agree’, which is where we see more variation.

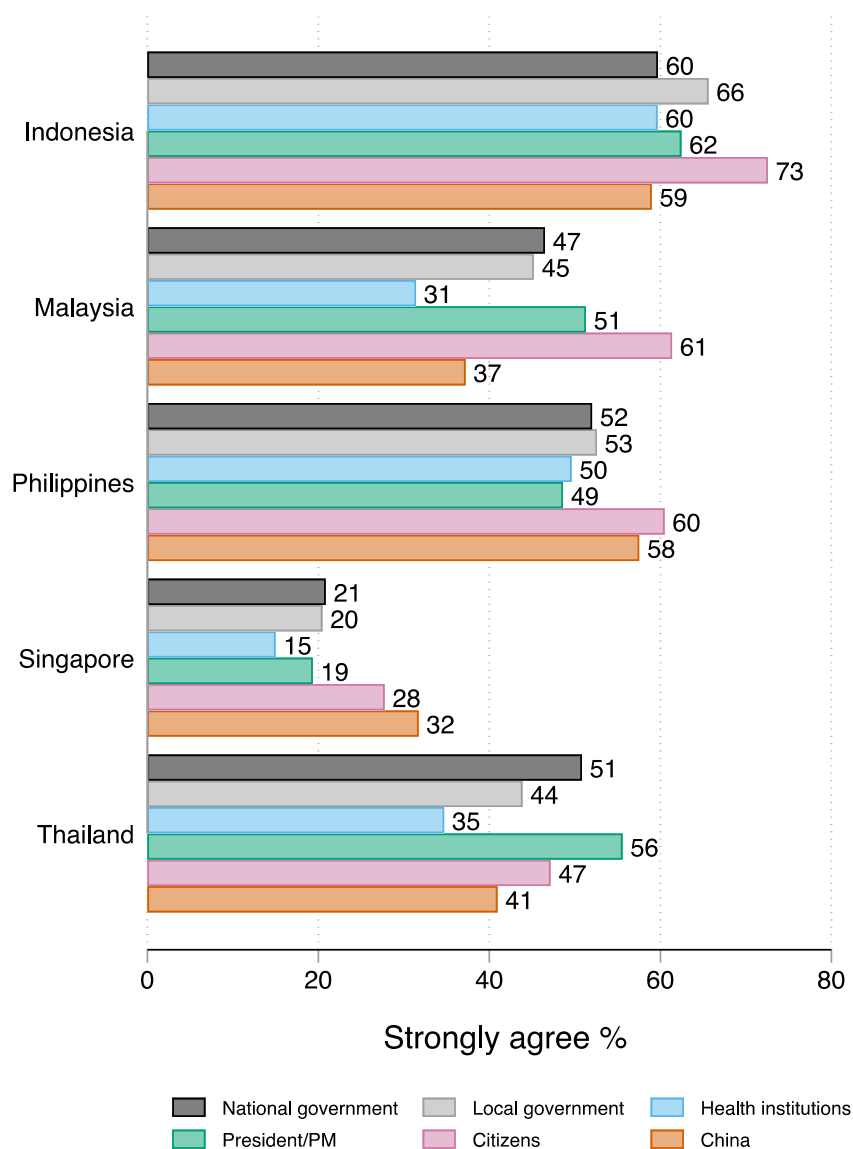


Figure 19. Actors who should have done a better job in containing the pandemic.

The consistent outlier was Singapore, where significantly lower numbers strongly agreed with these statements about who could have performed better (though once combined with the 'somewhat agree' category, the majority still agreed overall). The results in Singapore could simply reflect the government's relative success at containing the virus. But the country's highly restricted media landscape and surveilled public sphere also mean there has been comparatively little open debate or scrutiny of the government's COVID-19 policies over the course of the pandemic, even during the periods when cases spiked; at the same time, mainstream media have publicised rule-breakers and the penalties they have faced for their malfeasance, perhaps contributing to the relatively greater reprobation of fellow citizens than state authorities.

Feelings that the pandemic should have been handled better ran hottest in Indonesia, with well over 90% of respondents' agreeing that the various actors should have performed better, making the overall satisfaction levels with government performance in Indonesia all the more puzzling — 62% of Indonesian respondents reported being somewhat or very satisfied with the response of the national government (Figure 17), even though a majority strongly agreed that the national government should have done a better job (Figure 19). One possible explanation is that the general question about satisfaction with government's response to COVID-19 triggers a more partisan response, such that people who support President Jokowi simply answer in the affirmative while those who oppose him express dissatisfaction (Figure 20); when asked about different and more specific aspects of the government's pandemic management, however, respondents provide more discerning and critical answers.

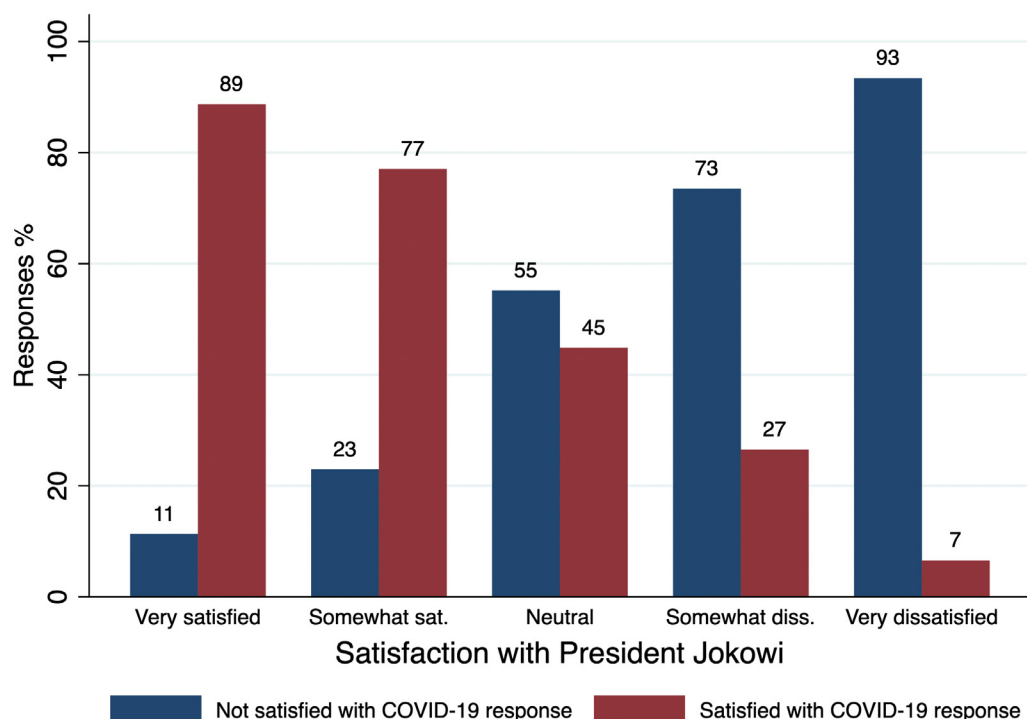


Figure 20. Satisfaction with COVID-19 response by presidential approval (Jokowi, Indonesia)

It is also worth drawing attention to the one group that Southeast Asian respondents thought above all should have stepped up more: citizens. Across our entire sample, 90% of respondents either somewhat or strongly agreed that citizens should have done a better job at controlling the pandemic, with especially high responses in Indonesia and Malaysia (95% and 94.4%, respectively).

We also asked respondents if they thought any particular group in society was responsible for spreading the virus by not complying with government rules. In all but Singapore, a majority agreed (with a particularly high positive response rate in Thailand). That said, responses to an open-ended question about *which* group they

might fault suggest greater ambiguity. In all our cases, respondents identify a mix of people who flout regulations on social-distancing, masking, etc.; migrant workers or other foreigners; and specific ethnic communities (notably the Chinese, which might indicate either local ethnic Chinese or China). Politicians also loom large, likely reflecting both highly publicized lesser penalties for politician rule-breakers in Malaysia, for instance, but also perceptions that politicians as a whole could have done more.

One possible reason for placing blame on citizens relates to each country's longer history of individualised responsibility. This phenomenon is clearly observable in the Philippines, where blaming 'stubborn rule-breakers' and 'do nothings' for the spread of the virus follows a similar pattern in assigning blame for the spread of illegal drugs to that which justifies the Duterte administration's harsh approach against criminality. This, arguably, can also explain why the President remains popular despite citizens' low satisfaction with the national government's pandemic response. While Filipinos want to have better services, they ascribe blame less to the president than to unvirtuous citizens who merit punishment.

To round off this discussion, in order to explore to what extent respondents saw ameliorating the effects of the pandemic as their government's responsibility in the first place – and specifically whether their assessment of the pandemic and accountability for it were affected by religious fatalism – we asked whether the virus was 'an act of God that could not have been contained'. Among our respondents, 63.7% and 53.9% of Indonesians and Malaysians, respectively, strongly or somewhat agreed with this perspective, a significantly higher rate than in the other countries (Table 2). That finding partly reflects the fact that Muslims were more likely to agree (54.4%) with this perspective than non-Muslims (32.6%). It is also possible that in Indonesia, where such fatalism was most sharply pronounced, these levels may also reflect government leaders' pronouncements, especially early in the pandemic, to the effect that their piety would protect Indonesians.<sup>14</sup> Similar rhetoric circulated, too, in Malaysia, particularly among devotees reluctant to abstain from collective religious observance.<sup>15</sup>

		Total	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand
The virus is an act of God that could not have been contained	Strongly agree	20.5%	35.4%	19.6%	9.5%	10.4%	14.1%
	Some-what agree	25.6%	28.3%	24.3%	17.0%	30.6%	25.3%
	Some-what disagree	31.1%	25.2%	32.6%	27.5%	35.0%	40.7%
	Strongly disagree	22.8%	11.1%	23.6%	45.9%	24.0%	19.9%

Table 2. Agreement or disagreement with COVID-19 as unpreventable divine act

Religious fatalism, meanwhile, did seem to have an effect on respondents' evaluation of government performance, with religious fatalists expressing significantly higher levels of overall satisfaction with government performance than did those not inclined to see divine intervention as behind the pandemic (see Figure 21).

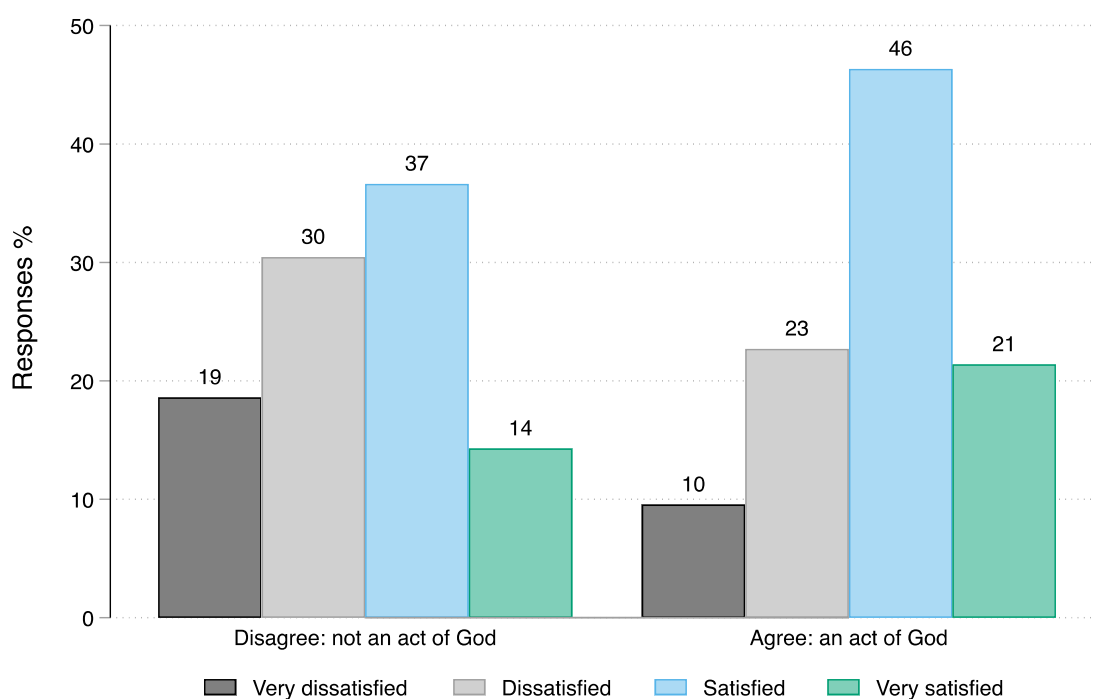


Figure 21. Fatalist views and satisfaction with government response



## Authoritarian support

Even at the early stages of the pandemic, political analysts and activists began warning of the serious challenge the virus posed to democracy.<sup>16</sup> The emergency motivated governments around the world to initiate coercive health directives — lockdowns, forced quarantines and curfews — which, in some contexts, ushered in or served to legitimate broader programs of control. Over the course of 2020, the pace of democratic decline accelerated around the world as political leaders, both elected and autocratic, leveraged the crisis to centralise their grip on power, silence critical media, and repress opposition.<sup>17</sup> A special report by Freedom House concluded that ‘the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the 14 years of consecutive decline in freedom’, noting that ‘the problem is particularly acute in struggling democracies and highly repressive states’ — a category in which we include the weak democracies and semi-authoritarian states of Southeast Asia.<sup>18</sup> Across all our five countries, analysts have documented a range of illiberal state interventions that shrink civic space — ranging from constrained electoral campaigning in Singapore in July 2020, further winnowing down the opposition toolkit, to the proroguing, then full suspension of Malaysia’s parliament, incidentally allowing the prime minister to evade a near-certain vote of no confidence — which state officials justified as a means of maintaining security, order, and public health during a time of crisis.<sup>19</sup>

Much of the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic stresses the agency of government leaders in these processes of democratic decline. At the same time, another plausible explanation is that citizens themselves accede to, or even demand, stronger state actions and more authoritarian measures out of existential fear and concern for self-protection.

Accordingly, we presented participants with a series of questions designed to measure their attitudes to undemocratic or illiberal interventions. The results suggest that while many people throughout the region would, in the broadest sense, prefer stronger government with less emphasis on individual rights, they vary immensely when it comes to accepting *specific* state controls and coercive efforts in the context of the pandemic.

First we asked respondents about their preference for generally more or less democratic governance in a time of crisis. Specifically, we queried whether they felt the pandemic had demonstrated a need for strong government with less emphasis on individual rights or, conversely, a need for government that protects individual rights. We found the greatest support for strong government in Singapore and Thailand, the two least formally democratic regimes among our cases, where some sections of the population arguably have a long history of support for authoritarian control (Figure 22). A majority of respondents from the two most democratic of our cases, Indonesia and the Philippines, felt the pandemic proved individual rights needed protecting. While this finding may seem surprising for the Philippines, where President Duterte’s strongman rule remains popular, it is consistent with previous polls that demonstrate citizens’ opposition to martial law, extrajudicial killings, and violent and vulgar rhetoric.<sup>20</sup>

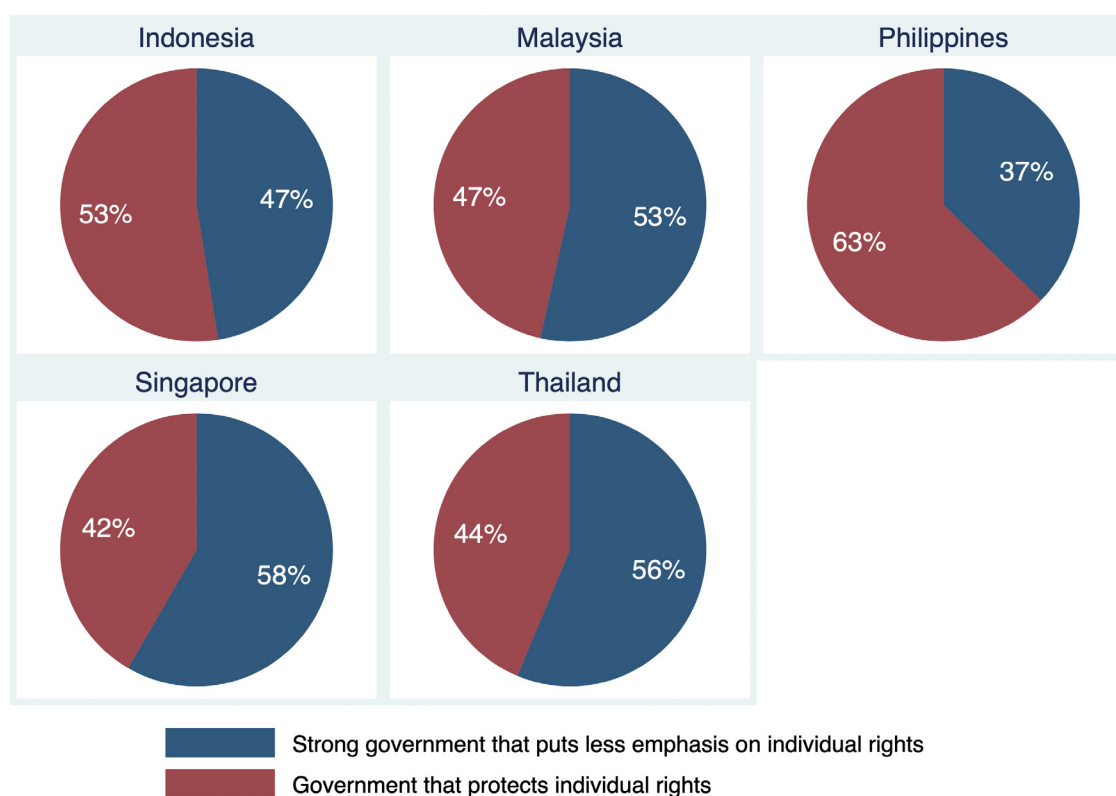


Figure 22. Preferences regarding individual rights, by country

Interestingly, we do see variation from these national patterns when we disaggregate by economic security (Figure 22). Socioeconomic class had minimal effect on Indonesians' overall (fairly slight) preference for protecting rights. For the Philippines, the most economically secure were least firm in that commitment — perhaps reflecting greater concern for increasing property and other crimes during an emergency — but economic position otherwise had no impact on attitudes. The most striking finding is for Thailand and Singapore, our more-authoritarian cases. In both, preferences regarding rights-protection flipped among the most economically precarious: only they were more inclined toward a government that protects individual rights.

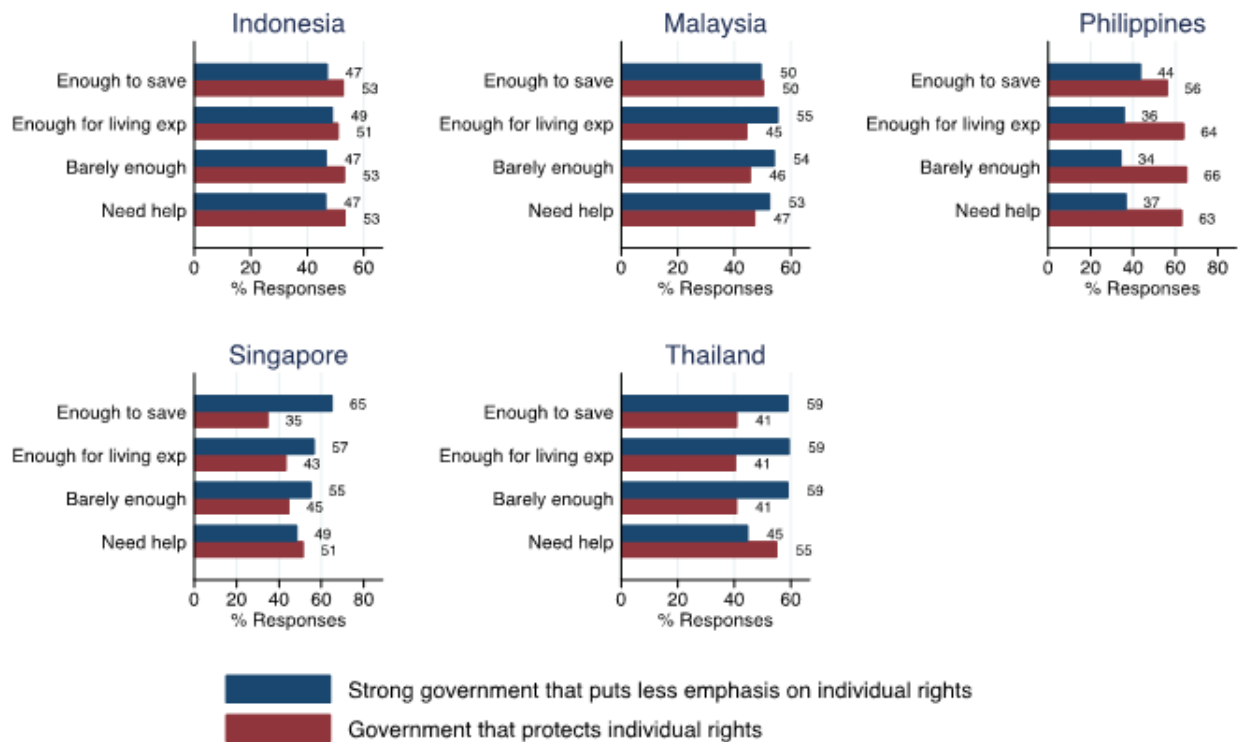


Figure 23. Preferences for protection of individual rights, by income group

To probe more deeply into citizens' preference for a relatively stronger state, we also explored the extent to which citizens' attitudes to emergency and authoritarian responses to the pandemic vary with the precise measure proposed. Is the pandemic giving rise to a generalized mood of public support for strong government and less emphasis on civil liberties, or are citizens more likely to support specific coercive measures they believe will help suppress the virus? Accordingly, we asked respondents to imagine a situation in which the pandemic worsened, and whether, in that circumstance, they would support a range of measures that curtailed citizens' freedoms.

Two general observations arise from this finding (Figure 24). First, *citizens are discerning*. Respondents gave by far the strongest net support to government imposition of curfews — a measure to which most of them would have been habituated during the first wave of responses to the pandemic in 2020 (and many of whom likely recall similar quarantine measures to contain the SARS outbreak in 2003). By contrast, we found uniform net disapproval of restrictions on the media's ability to criticize the government (even though states in our sample did enact or enforce such strictures). Other measures (passing emergency laws without parliamentary approval, suspending civil liberties and involving the military and police in government) revealed striking national-level variations (Figure 25).

The most dramatic contrast in our findings was between the strong net support for involving the military and police in government in Indonesia (where military involvement in political life generally attracts comparatively high levels of public support) and almost equally strong net *disapproval* of such a step in Thailand, reflecting that country's recent experience of — and widespread opposition to — direct military rule (Figure 26). By contrast, we see, seemingly perversely, much higher support for military involvement in persistently civilian-led Malaysia (60% in favour). It may well be that, lacking experience of a strong military or police role in governance, Malaysians see less reason to fear such a role than do, for instance, their Thai counterparts.

Another striking finding, but one that echoes our findings above regarding support for individual rights in the Philippines: there is relatively strong rejection of restrictions on civil liberties in the Philippines, where President Duterte has made no secret of his disregard for democratic niceties. These data suggest real limits to the Philippine public's support of 'strongman' measures: against (purported) criminal, antisocial drug-users and -pushers,<sup>21</sup> but not against the general public.

The big picture is thus mixed: while our survey reveals significant support for some authoritarian measures, Southeast Asian citizens are certainly not providing *carte blanche* to their governments to wind back civil liberties and political rights in response to the pandemic.

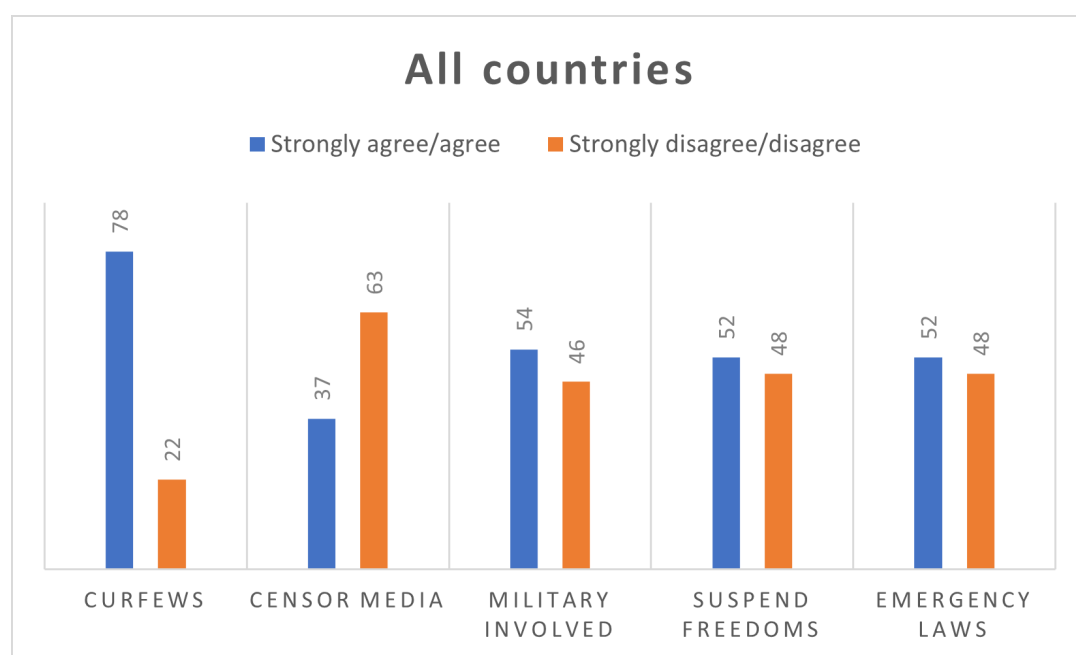


Figure 24. Support for emergency measures, all countries

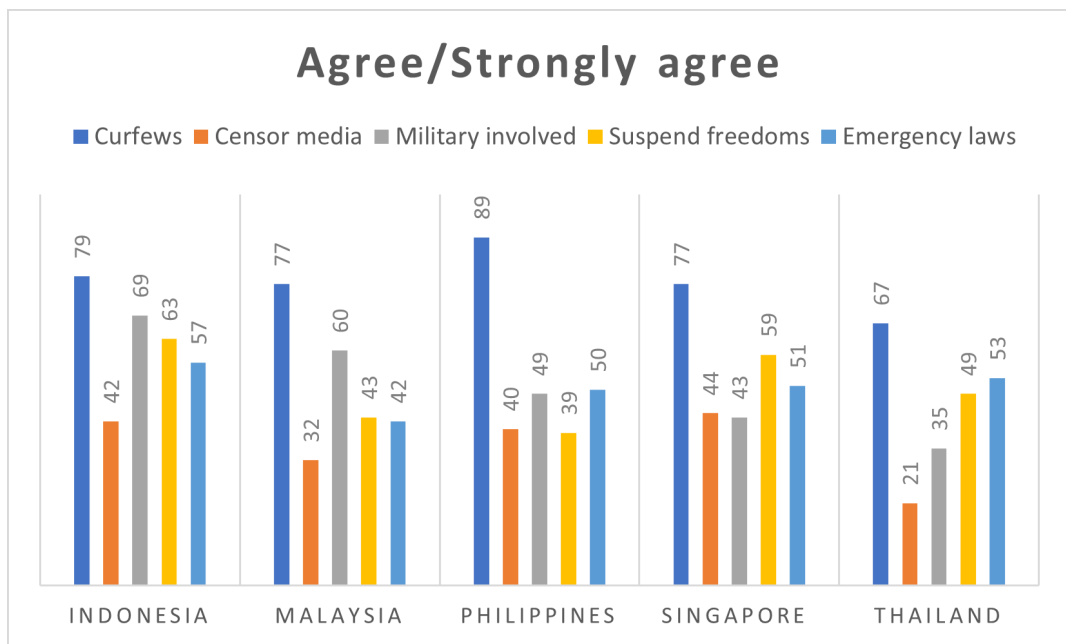


Figure 25. Support for emergency measures, by country

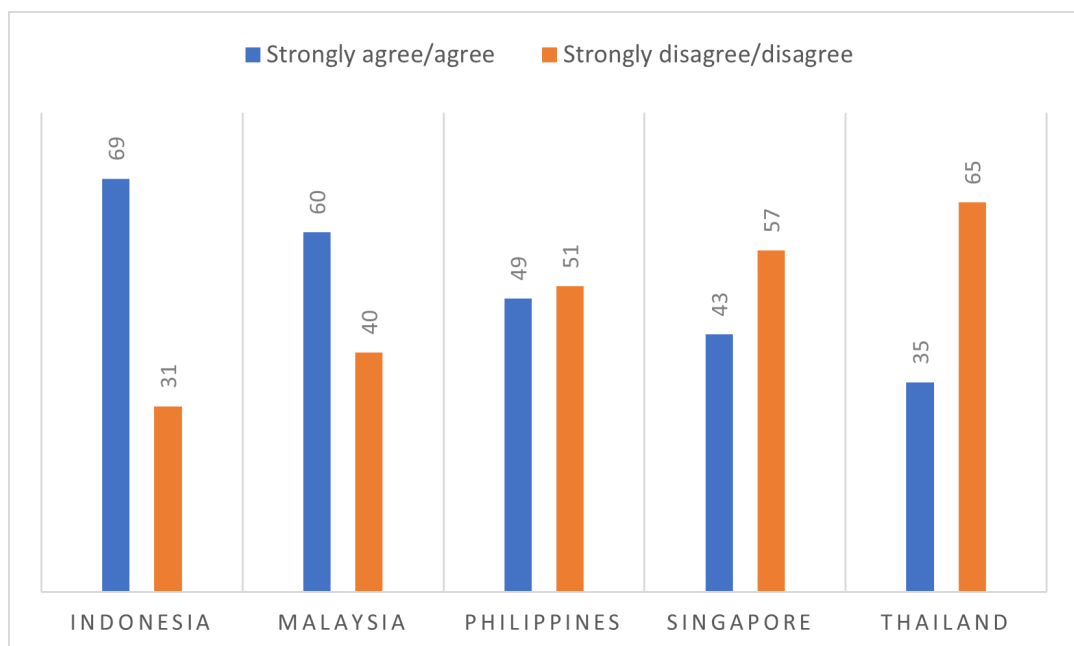


Figure 26. Support for involvement of the military and police, by country

Second, however, compiling these indicators into a rough composite measure of support for illiberalism (Table 3), we find again *significant variation across Southeast Asian countries*. Indonesian respondents were by far the most strongly in favour of authoritarian measures, with a net positive score of just over 20% (i.e. on average, 20% more Indonesian respondents approved of authoritarian measures than disapproved). By contrast, Thai respondents were the most opposed, with a net *negative* score of

almost 8%, indicating the strongest opposition among our cases to illiberal measures. We caution against reading too much into these aggregated data, given the nuances we note across measures, but include them for the evidence they offer of real attitudinal variations across the region — notwithstanding the enduring prevalence of culturally reductionist arguments of ‘Asian values’ conducive to strong leadership and disparaging of individualism. These data also align at least suggestively with recent concerns for democratic regression and authoritarian resurgence in Indonesia and the Philippines, and with deep-set opposition to the most recent coup and its political afterlife in Thailand.

*Table 3. Net support for authoritarian measures, by country*

	Composite average
Indonesia	20.4
Philippines	6.7
Singapore	7.0
Malaysia	2.0
Thailand	-7.8

## Conclusion

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had serious consequences for all Southeast Asia — and continues to wreak havoc there as the Delta variant spreads — those consequences have both been varied in their severity across countries, and have affected upon countries that differed widely in their social, economic and political conditions even prior to the pandemic. With a view to this complexity, the survey we have presented in this report represents an attempt to understand how the pandemic is impacting public attitudes across the region, but in ways that vary across and within countries. (We should stress that this report presents only a broad-brushstroke picture of the responses: in future papers, we will drill further into the findings presented here and examine other survey questions we have not been able to analyse in this report.)

With this caveat in mind, we can identify from this report both broadly shared patterns and points of divergence across the region. Among the broad patterns are the generally high concern with almost all aspects of the pandemic experienced across countries and subgroups. Another consistent finding is that less economically secure Southeast Asians tend to be more concerned about the various impacts of the pandemic than their more economically secure compatriots. In other respects, however, there is significant variation. This variation is particularly evident when it comes to grappling with the political implications of the crisis. While it has by now been well established that the pandemic is strengthening autocratic tendencies world-wide, we see very mixed evidence of support for greater authoritarianism across the region. Respondents are divided on whether they think the pandemic shows that a government that places less emphasis on individual rights is needed, and they are discerning also in terms of what emergency measures they support in response to the pandemic. Such findings do not suggest an upsurge in support for more authoritarian government across the region.

The crisis occasioned by this pandemic is far from over. As we finalize this report, hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians are infected, and many more are experiencing bereavement, loss of livelihood, and other forms of distress. The pandemic will cast a long shadow over Southeast Asia for many years to come. This report is obviously, therefore, far from being the last word on the political and social impacts of the crisis; on the contrary, we are at the early stages of analysing processes of change that might take many years to pan out. In doing so, we need to take careful account of the considerable diversity across the region that this survey has highlighted. This pandemic has not affected all Southeast Asians equally; nor is it changing minds and moulding opinions in uniform ways.

## Endnotes

- 1        Given the disparate population sizes of countries in the region, raw numbers may offer an overly sanguine impression of countries other than behemoth Indonesia. With less than one-ninth Indonesia's population, for instance, as of 22 July 2021, Malaysia had an official total case rate of 31,426 per million population — by far the highest in the region — compared with 11,502 per million for Indonesia. ('Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker', Center for Strategic & International Studies, accessed 25 July 2021. <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/projects/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker> ) That said, this disparity does as much to indicate severity in Malaysia as how much less reliable testing and reporting are in Indonesia.
- 2        Yen Nee Lee, 'Goldman Sachs Says Covid Delta Variant Could "significantly" Hit Growth in Southeast Asia', *CNBC*, 15 July 2021, sec. Asia Economy. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/16/covid-goldman-cuts-southeast-asia-gdp-forecasts-as-delta-variant-spreads.html>
- 3        For example, for Indonesia, Marcus Mietzner, 'Populist Anti-Scientism, Religious Polarisation, and Institutionalised Corruption: How Indonesia's Democratic Decline Shaped Its COVID-19 Response', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 2 (1 August 2020): 227–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420935561>; but see Aurel Croissant, 'Democracies with Pre-Existing Conditions and the Coronavirus in the Indo-Pacific', *Asian Institute*, 6 June 2021. <http://www.theasanforum.org/democracies-with-preexisting-conditions-and-the-coronavirus-in-the-indo-pacific/>
- 4        Meredith L. Weiss, *The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics in Southeast Asia*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020, chapter 6.
- 5        Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall, 'Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency and Popular Opinion', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 255–85; Nicole Curato, 'Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 1 (2017): 142–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2016.1239751>
- 6        Azmil Tayeb, 'Malaysia in 2020: Fragile Coalitional Politics and Democratic Regression', *Asian Survey* 61, no. 1 (January/February 2021): 99–105, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2021.61.1.99>
- 7        Supalak Ganjanakhundee, 'Thailand in 2020: A Turbulent Year', *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2021 (2021): 335–55. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/796869>
- 8        A very small number of respondents completed the survey in the first half of June 2021.
- 9        Roughly 1,000 each in Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, and



2,000 in Indonesia.

10 Ian Goldin and Robert Muggah, 'COVID-19 Is Increasing Multiple Kinds of Inequality. Here's What We Can Do about It', World Economic Forum, accessed 16 July 2021. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/covid-19-is-increasing-multiple-kinds-of-inequality-here-s-what-we-can-do-about-it/>

11 *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*, United Nations, 9 April 2020. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/report/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en-1.pdf>

12 Note that a total of eleven respondents identified as neither male or female; we exclude them from the figures 12-14.

13 Cenon Alfonso, Manuel Dayrit, Ronald Mendoza, and Madeline Ong, 'From Dengvaxia to Sinovac: Vaccine Hesitancy in the Philippines', *The Diplomat*, 8 March 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/from-dengvaxia-to-sinovac-vaccine-hesitancy-in-the-philippines/>

14 Indonesia's health minister, Terawan, for example, said in February 2020 that prayers were protecting Indonesians from the virus: Dewi Nurita, "Terawan Sebut Doa Jadi Salah Satu Alasan Indonesia Bebas COVID-19", *Tempo*, 28 February 2020. <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1313016/terawan-sebut-doa-jadi-salah-satu-alasan-indonesia-bebas-covid-19>

15 Min Min Tan, Ahmad Farouk Musa, Tin Tin Su, 'The Role of Religion in Mitigating the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Malaysian Multi-faith Perspectives', *Health Promotion International* 2021 (forthcoming). <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daab041>

16 Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, 'Polarization and the Pandemic', 28 April 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/28/polarization-and-pandemic-pub-81638>

17 Richard Youngs and Elene Panchulidze, 'Global Democracy & COVID-19: Upgrading International Support' (IDEA, n.d.). <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/global-democracy-and-covid-19.pdf>

18 Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, 'Democracy under Lockdown' (Freedom House, October 2020), 1. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/democracy-under-lockdown>

See also: Palina Kolvani, Martin Lundstedt, Amanda B. Edgell, and Jean Lachapelle, 'Pandemic Backsliding: A Year of Violations and Advances in Response to Covid-19', *V-Dem Policy Brief*, No. 32, 6 July 2021. [https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer\\_public/35/13/35133a44-9a22-435a-b1bf-ced1b05a2b69/pb\\_32.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/35/13/35133a44-9a22-435a-b1bf-ced1b05a2b69/pb_32.pdf)

19 Croissant, 'Democracies with Pre-Existing Conditions and the Coronavirus in the Indo-Pacific'.

20 For a summary, see Richard Bernstein, 'The Paradox of Rodrigo Duterte,' *The Atlantic*, 22 February 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/02/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-china/606754/>

21 Paul D. Kenny and Ronald Holmes, 'A New Penal Populism? Rodrigo Duterte, Public Opinion, And the War On Drugs In The Philippines,' *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 20(2), 187-205.





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