

## S'pore govt needs to inoculate public better against Covid-19 fears, IPS academic says

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The panic-buying behaviour witnessed in Singapore was perhaps just momentary panic which could have been anticipated better by the public communications management, Senior Research Fellow Carol Soon from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has suggested at a recent forum.

The forum held on Feb. 25, 2020 was attended by Vernon Lee, director of the Communicable Diseases Division at the Ministry of Health (MOH), Barnabas Gan, an economist at United Overseas Bank (UOB), Shashi Jayakumar, senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), and Soon herself.

The forum on Singapore's response to Covid-19 was moderated by Gillian Goh, the deputy director of research at the IPS.

### *GOVT NEEDS TO ANTICIPATE PUBLIC FEARS BETTER*

Towards the end of the hour-long session, Soon pointed out that public panic surrounding Covid-19 could be managed better by public communications by "anticipating and inoculating", to alleviate fears.

She suggested that the panic-buying behaviour witnessed in Singapore two weekends ago was more of a "momentary panic" rather than a trust deficit or lack of social resilience.

"Whether it's the medical care, medical responses, or the public communications management, or even media communications, really needs to do a lot more anticipation and inoculating," Soon said.

She added that there was some semblance of the government attempting to inoculate the public: "It was almost two weeks ago, when the multi-ministry (task force) sensed some early murmurings of people wondering if we were going to move to DORSCON Red. The spokesperson came out to say "no, we are not".

"I think that's important. That is a way of inoculating people," Soon said.

Shashi added that there was feedback from the ground that many felt that there was a lack of warning between the shift from DORSCON Yellow to DORSCON Orange, which might have resulted in the panic-buying reaction, as it happened on the same day when the alert shifted.

He suggested that there was a need to put out some strategic information to assure the public that Singapore is well-prepared for a potentially worsening situation, to allay the fears and minimise hoarding by members of the public.

"The more we do that, the less we get videos of people proudly showcasing their "minimart" stockpiles at home," he joked.

### *TIME NEEDED TO UNDERSTAND SEVERITY OF COVID-19 ON ECONOMY*

When asked about the economic outlook after the Covid-19 outbreak, Gan said that more time was needed to understand the impact of the outbreak on Singapore's economy.

However, he added that PM Lee Hsien Loong had already mentioned that a recession was possible.

Looking at numbers alone, he said that the tourism sector was looking at an estimated fall of S\$6.8 to S\$8.1 billion in 2020, considering the the Singapore Tourism Board has projected a fall in tourist arrivals by 25 to 30 per cent.

He also said that the projected loss in the tourism sector could possibly wipe out gains in GDP this year.

When asked whether the local market could help alleviate the losses of local retailers and the tourism industry, Gan said: "Tourism is a big part of the Singapore economy, and I'm sure that the tourism industry would agree with me that just tapping on staycations and Singaporeans just going for local restaurants to have a meal, isn't going to cut it."

However, Gan mentioned that the factors were highly dependent on how long the outbreak was going to last.

He compared the situation to 2003 during the SARS outbreak, in which Singapore was declared "SARS-free" after three months of battling the virus in the country.

"As such, consumer confidence as well as the global economy and the Singapore economy actually picked up after."

"We only saw one quarter of negative growth — in the second quarter of 2003," he pointed out.

He clarified that it could be very optimistic to believe that Singapore would be declared "Covid-19 free" within three months, but that the Budget 2020 injection could be well-timed to help individuals and businesses to push through, and possibly return to normal again shortly after the outbreak.