

Food Politics and the Paradigm Shift in the Parliamentary Debate on Food Security

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Abstract

Food security has become a pertinent issue that is constantly being discussed in the mass media and even in parliamentary debates among the politicians. The topic of food security is political; hence, it should be handled with care within a confined aspect known as food politics. This paper is a preliminary stage study to examine which facets of food security that were most prominently debated among the members of the House of Representatives and whether the discussions were in line with and accurately portrayed the actual situation on the ground among the public. Hansards from the Parliament of Malaysia seatings in 2019 and 2022 were obtained as secondary data for analysis. The finding showed that the question of food availability was frequently mentioned in parliamentary debates as availability was the precursor to the other dimensions of food security. Additionally, food security issues raised by our politicians correspond with current major global issues that are affecting the public; collectively known as the 3C-shock: COVID-19, Climate Change and Conflict (Russia-Ukraine War).

Keywords: food politic, food security, agriculture, Global Food Security Index (GFSI), United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)

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Introduction

Food politics refers to the political atmosphere, institutions, processes, or content that either deter or promote food security or insecurity.¹ Dr Marion Nestle² popularised the term food politics. The premise of this term refers to the food industry, which like any other industry, plays a political tug-of-war to ensure that government policies and legislations favour and benefit them³. In many countries, including Malaysia, a nation's political stability and ability to provide for its citizens' nutritional needs are often inextricably linked. The disruption of food supplies brought on by wars and other forms of civil strife has historically been the root cause of significant instances of famine and malnutrition.

Nevertheless, food security and political stability are intertwined and interdependent on one another. For instance, a nation's ability to ensure the availability of its food supply can affect its government's stability.⁴ Concurrently, political instability, which can take the form of wars or civil strife, can affect a country's ability to provide adequate food for its citizens,⁵ as recently demonstrated in Ukraine. The greatest threat to the stability of a regime is the possibility of urban unrest, which can be sparked by a lack of food or a sudden increase in the cost of various food items. Therefore, governments' hypersensitivity, especially among Asian countries, to the issue of food security may be reflective of their bid to avert social unrest which could potentially lead to a political revolution. Consequently, ensuring food security becomes essential to the survival of the regime. Because the existing food systems are both

1 M. Phillipov, 'The New Politics of Food: Television and the Media/Food Industries,' *Media International Australia* 158, no. 1 (2016): pp. 90-98, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878x15627339>> accessed 10 October 2022.

2 Western nutritionist who wrote on how the food industry influences nutrition and health. She believes politics, government and the food industry are influencing the way consumers eat.

3 M. Nestle, 'Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition ... – Jstor Home,' ed. Michelle Pollan, (2016) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt7zw29z.6>> accessed 26 November 2022.

4 Carolan, Michael. *Embodied Food Politics*. 1st ed. London, England: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016, pp 10.

5 E. Flannery and D. Mincyte, '*Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 10, no. 6' (June 17, 2010): pp. 423-427, <<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708610372>> accessed 10 October 2022.

unsustainable and unequal, a change in political structure is required in order to achieve the desired level of development.^{6,7}

Food Politics is a Subset of National Security

National security comprised of both military and non-military dimensions. The traditional perspective of national security accounted for the arms race, military technology, order of battle, military capabilities and strength of nations as an effective strategy to deter potential force, aggressors and threats of power to both internal violation and territorial integrity of the state. However, the non-military dimensions and forms exceed war, crime and violence but focus on society's physical, socioeconomic and psychological quality of life. It may include economic security, energy security, social security, environmental security, infrastructure security, cyber security and food security. Countries that could not guarantee food security to their general populace would often fare poorly in the economy and prosperity. Current security threats are no longer confined to political factors but involve economic considerations. Overall national prosperity and better gross domestic production (GDP) are tightly linked with food security. There are many linkages between food security and the economy. However, the most obvious is the production of agricultural produce.

Former Malaysia's Defence Minister, Hishammuddin Hussein, at Asia's top security summit, *i.e.*, the Shangri-La Dialogue, in Singapore, was quoted as saying that soaring food prices are a security concern.⁸ He then pointed to the political instability in several nations facing the threat of inflation as a warning to the rest of the region. Rising food prices may push people over the edge, generating a wave of instability with potential protests and riots affecting the security environments of the nations. The skyrocketing price of staple food items like wheat and rice stokes fury, warranted or otherwise, against governments. The best examples are the recent unrest in Sri Lanka and Pakistan over inflation

6 C. Lavin, 'Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics on JSTOR,' (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt32bcnz>> accessed 29 September 2022.

7 M. Leach and the others, 'Food Politics and Development,' *World Development* 134 (October 2020): Article-105024, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105024>> accessed 29 September 2022.

8 Online, The Star. "Food Security Critical for Peace, Says Hishammuddin." The Star. Nation, June 12, 2022. <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/06/12/food-security-critical-for-peace-says-hishammuddin/.....>> accessed 19 November 2022.

and the Arab Spring⁹ more than 10 years ago,¹⁰ where protestors cried out for freedom, justice and bread. Food insecurity threatens social stability and exacerbates conflicts; no country is immune to this.

Definition of Food Security

When discussing the terminology of food security, there needs to be a thoughtful exploration of the more meaningful definition of food security. Hence, the main objective of this study is to produce a strong consensus on the most discussed food security issues among the members of the House of Representatives. The parliamentary answers of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security,¹¹ an institution entrusted to oversee food security, were studied to reach this objective, along with two (2) policy documents, the *National Agrofood Policy 2021–2030* and the *National Food Security Policy Action Plan 2021–2025*. The Malaysian government typically applies food security terminology to everything that are related to the national food supply when disseminating information to the public. Conceptually, this is because the term food security appears relatively quantifiable and straightforward.¹²

The meaning of the term food security, even though it has a commonly accepted definition, is often very diverse, making it difficult to expect a clear definition of food security without using a specific approach to narrow the discussion. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations defines food security as a situation that exists “*when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life*”.¹³

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- 9 “Arab Spring.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., February 14, 2023. <<https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Spring>> accessed 14 February 2023.
- 10 Maria Josua and Mirjam Edel, ‘The Arab Uprisings and the Return of Repression,’ *Mediterranean Politics* 26, no.5 (2021): pp. 586-611, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1889298>> accessed 11 November 2022.
- 11 Formerly known as Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industries. Headquartered in Precinct 4, Putrajaya.
- 12 M. Z., Syafuddin Tan and the others. A conceptual study on the actors of the food security sustainability in Malaysia. *e-Proceeding 1st International Conference on Public Policies and Social Studies Student Edition* (2022). UiTM, Shah Alam. pp. 131 – 139.
- 13 Achieving food security for all is at the heart of the efforts of FAO. The definition was retrieved from a report ‘The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, 2021 Edition. See < https://reliefweb.int/report/world/state-food-security-and-nutrition-world-2021-transformingfoodsysteamsfoodsecurity?gclid=CjwKCAjw_YShBhAiEiwAMomsEHuBLDYJyVuoFA_8SNiIrJpJzHqSDE18v2_LNGz9ZYOVcsmnqh9xJhoC8R8QAvD_BwE> accessed 29 September 2022.

Dimensions of Food Security

There are four (4) food security dimensions: availability, access, utilisation and stability.¹⁴

Figure 1: Inter-level dimensional relationship of food security¹⁵

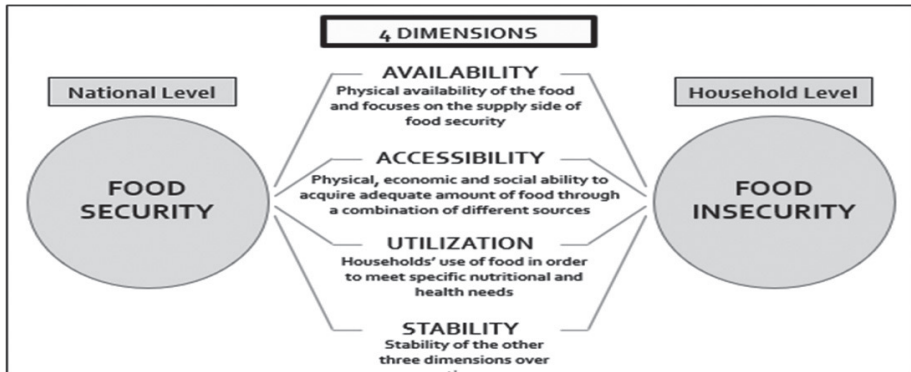


Figure 1 shows an inter-level dimensional relationship between the food security dimensions at two (2) levels, which are national and household. The dimensions are hierarchical, starting from availability. After all, we cannot speak about accessibility before the food is even physically available. The same goes for utilisation, which must be preceded by accesibility to food that are affordable to consumers. Finally, the stability dimension describes the temporal dimension when the supply, distribution and consumption of food at the household level remain constant in the long term.

Food Security in Malaysia

Currently, Malaysia is facing what some experts would describe as the 3C-shock,¹⁶ *i.e.*, the COVID-19 pandemic, impacts from conflicts in Russia-Ukraine, and climate change effects such as floods and drought. Undoubtedly, the current direction of Malaysia's food security will be landscaped upon these shocks. Food security is a never-ending concern

14 M. Akbari and the others, 'The Evolution of Food Security: Where Are We Now, Where Should We Go next?,' *Sustainability* 14, no. 6 (19 March 2022), <<https://doi.org/10.3390/su14063634>> accessed 8 December 2022.

15 Presentation from a MAFS officer to the authors on 9 September 2022 (*personal communication*).

16 A term coined by Professor Datin Paduka Fatimah Mohamed Arshad, a Senior Fellow of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS).

in academic discussions. Frequently debated in the mass media and the Parliament of Malaysia, this issue never failed to catch the public's attention. Food system disruption post-COVID-19 and floods in Malaysia, combined with the global food crisis amid the Russia-Ukraine conflicts, caught the attention of Malaysian King al-Sultan Abdullah, who decreed that the food security crisis needs to be addressed immediately.¹⁷ A long-term plan must be drawn up to strengthen food security and ensure a reasonable cost of living.

Long-standing structural problems affecting the domestic food security are keeping Malaysia vulnerable to the global food supply shortage shock that has sent prices of food items soaring. Food insecurity in the country came under the limelight following the COVID-19 pandemic which has revealed underlying inequalities in food accessibility. The first factor, the COVID-19 pandemic, unintentionally exposed the underlying threats to food security sustainability. The threats are lower agricultural productivity, supply chain disruption, and affected international trade caused by the protectionism policy.^{18,19,20,21,22} During the COVID-19 pandemic, food production and distribution have been disrupted due to the limited supply of raw materials and inputs, shortages in labour

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- 17 'King: Food Security Crisis Needs to Be Addressed Immediately,' BERNAMA, *The Star Online*, (June 6, 2022), <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/06/06/king-food-security-crisis-needs-to-be-addressed-immediately>> accessed 10 October 2022.
 - 18 Cappelli, Alessio, and Enrico Cini. "Will the COVID-19 Pandemic Make Us Reconsider the Relevance of Short Food Supply Chains and Local Productions?" *Trends in Food Science & Technology*. U.S. National Library of Medicine, March 31, 2020. <<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32288230/>> accessed 8 October 2022.
 - 19 C. Chin, 'The Impact of Food Supply Chain Disruptions amidst Covid-19 in Malaysia,' *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 9, no. 4 (August 19, 2020): pp. 1-3, <<https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2020.094.031>> accessed 8 October 2022.
 - 20 J. Clapp and W. G. Moseley, 'This Food Crisis Is Different: Covid-19 and the Fragility of the Neoliberal Food Security Order,' *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 47, no. 7 (October 11, 2020): pp. 1393-1417, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2020.1823838>> accessed 8 October 2022.
 - 21 M. Z. Syafuddin Tan and the others. A conceptual study on the actors of the food security sustainability in Malaysia. *e-Proceeding 1st International Conference on Public Policies and Social Studies Student Edition* (2022). UiTM, Shah Alam. pp. 131 – 139.
 - 22 M. Shafullah, U. Khalid, and S. M. Chaudhry, 'Do Stock Markets Play a Role in Determining the COVID-19 Economic Stimulus? A Cross-Country Analysis,' *SSRN Electronic Journal*, July 7, 2020, pp. 1393-1417, <<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3644851>> accessed 31 August 2022.

and market access, hindrances in global supply chains and exports, as well as decreasing bulk demand from the hospitality and tourism sector.^{23,24} Concurrently, food prices showed significant increase due to the unpredictable market and changes in consumer patterns. Transport restrictions hampered the agricultural services and production. They prevented farmers from selling their produce or buying inputs, resulting in a loss of produce and income; and an increase in post-harvest loss as well as food waste. At the same time, consumers were also faced with difficulties in accessing enough food to meet their daily dietary needs.²⁵

The best reference to benchmark the development of Malaysia's food security will be the annual Global Food Security Index (GFSI).²⁶ The index recorded several scores for Malaysia in various dimensions and indicators from 2012 until its latest edition in 2022. GFSI is highly influential and often quoted by Malaysia's politicians, media, academicians, and the government whenever they speak about food security.

Global Food Security Index (GFSI)

Malaysia ranked 43rd among 113 countries in the GFSI 2020. In 2021, Malaysia climbed to the 39th position in 2021 before slipping into the 41st position in 2022. Overall, it showed that Malaysia could be categorised as relatively food-secure, as Malaysia scored higher than the median

23 A. A. A., Shaharudin, 'Protecting the Agriculture Sector During the Covid-19 Crisis'. (6 April 2020). Khazanah Research Institute <https://www.krinstitute.org/Views-@-Protecting_the_Agriculture_Sector_During_the_Covid-19_Crisis.aspx> accessed 20 December 2022.

24 N. Vaghefi, 'The Heavy Impact of Covid-19 on the Agriculture Sector and the Food Supply Chain,' Penang Institute (December 3, 2021), <<https://penanginstitute.org/publications/covid-19-crisis-assessments/the-heavy-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-agriculture-sector-and-the-food-supply-chain/>> accessed 10 October 2022.

25 J. M. Abdullah and the others, 'A Critical Appraisal of Covid-19 in Malaysia and Beyond,' The Malaysian journal of medical sciences: MJMS (10 April 2020), U.S. National Library of Medicine, <<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32308536/>> accessed 10 October 2022.

26 The Global Food Security Index (GFSI) considers the issues of food affordability, availability, quality and safety, and sustainability and adaptation across a set of 113 countries. The index is a dynamic quantitative and qualitative benchmarking model constructed from 68 unique indicators that measure the drivers of food security across both developing and developed countries. The index published by the Economist Impact and supported by CORTEVA Agriscience. The 1st edition was published in 2011.

score of the GFSI.²⁷ As a matter of fact, GFSI ranked Malaysia in the 2nd place behind Singapore in the Southeast Asia region 10 years in a row.²⁸

However, the public in general has varying perspectives on food security than MAFS. Many relevant parties still perceive Malaysia as being too dependent on food imports, as can be witnessed from the record-setting import bill for 2020, which hit MYR55.5 billion, thus assuming Malaysia has yet to arrive at the desired state of food security. In comparison, Malaysia's import bill in 2015 was recorded at MYR45.3 billion. From 2015 to 2020, there was a constant increment of 4.1% per year on the food import bill. However, post-COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia's food import dependency has worsened, as the 2021 food import bill hit MYR63.6 billion, a shocking increment of 14.6% in just one year. Meanwhile, in 2022, the food import bill reached MYR70 billion. The amount is outrageous because, as a comparison, it is nearly equivalent to the MYR77.6 billion development fund allocated under Budget 2022, which ironically is the highest development fund ever administered in history.²⁹

Food Security and Agriculture Setting in Southeast Asian Countries

Most of the agricultural land in Malaysia is situated in tropical lowlands, as does other Southeast Asian countries. Seasonal rainfall conditions largely control the productivity of tropical agriculture. Agriculture and farming practices depend on specific climate conditions. In that sense, agricultural practice is always context-specific, depending on local socioeconomics, environment and climate. Along those lines, food security and agricultural settings in other countries in Southeast Asia were comparable to Malaysia.

27 N. Shamsudin, "Food Security 2021 and Beyond," *New Straits Times* (Columnist, January 3, 2021), <<https://api.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2021/01/654137/food-security-2021-and-beyond>> accessed 8 November 2022.

28 Malaysia was ranked 1st in Southeast Asia in 2012, but from 2013 onwards fell to 2nd place, tailing Singapore.

29 According to the Ministry of Finance, development budget for 2023 will be as high as MYR95 billion, but pending approval from both houses of parliaments. See <https://www.bernama.com/bm/ekonomi/news_bajet.php?id=2127407> accessed 22 December 2022.

Table 1: Agriculture and Food Security Governance in the Southeast Asian Countries

Country	Ministry Overseeing Agriculture/Food Security	Dedicated Food Security Agency	Agriculture/Food Security-Related Policies
Malaysia	Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security	Food Safety and Quality Division (Ministry of Health)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Agro-Food Policy 2021–2030 • National Agri-Commodity Policy 2021–2030 • National Food Security Policy Action Plan 2021–2025
Brunei	Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism	Food Safety and Quality Control Division (Ministry of Health)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agro-Food Industries Action Plan • Aquaculture Industries Action Plan
Singapore	Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment	Singapore Food Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 by 30 Goal (30% local food production by 2030)
Indonesia	Ministry of Agriculture	National Food Security Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2012 Food Law
Cambodia	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries	Department of Drugs and Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cambodia Industrial Development Policy 2015–2025
Laos	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry	Nil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture Development Strategy 2025 and Vision to 2030
Myanmar	Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation	Food and Drugs Administration (Ministry of Health)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Myanmar National Action Plan for Food and Nutrition Security
Philippines	Department of Agriculture (equivalent to a ministry)	National Food Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philippine Development Plan 2017–2022
Thailand	Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives	Thai Food and Drug Administration (Ministry of Public Health)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20-Year Agricultural Development Plan (2017–2036)
Vietnam	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development	Agency of Food Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural Restructuring Plan 2017–2020

Table 1 shows that each of the Southeast Asian countries has its unique agriculture and food security setting. For example, small countries like Singapore and Brunei do not have an agriculture ministry. However, both countries' agriculture and food security matters are still being taken seriously and is placed under the purview of an appropriate ministry. However, the table also demonstrated that most governmental agencies across Southeast Asia focused more on food quality (micro-level) than food sustainability (macro-level).

Methodology

This study analysed the focus of the discussions among parliament members that revolved around food security. The members of parliament covered in this desk research were limited to the House of Representatives. The House of Representatives was chosen as the unit of analysis over the Senate on the basis that members of the House of Representatives represented the voices of their respective constituencies, thereby portraying more accurate ground responses. The analysis in this study was conducted on the contents of the parliamentary Hansard retrieved from the Malaysian House of Parliament online portal archive section.³⁰

In Malaysia, there was no platform to discuss food security holistically. Meanwhile, Singapore, for example, formed the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) on April 1, 2019, as a statutory body under the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment. The formation of SFA came to light with 'The Singapore Food Story' initiative, launched in March 2019, to increase the current 10% food self-sufficiency to 30%, an increment of 300% by 2030.³¹ Compared to Malaysia, it can be said that Singapore uses a whole-of-system approach to tap into all existing expertise in government agencies, the private sector, and higher education institutes.

The core objective of this study is to serve as a baseline and exploration to dive into the parliamentary debate. The sub-objective was to crosscheck whether the issues raised by the parliamentarians are aligned with what was happening to the public on the ground. Henceforth, this study should be regarded primarily as a preliminary assessment of members of parliament's involvement in the whole-of-nation approach regarding food security concerns.

30 The archive can be accessed at <<https://www.parlimen.gov.my/hansard-dewan-rakyat>>.

31 See <<https://www.sfa.gov.sg/fromSGtoSG/our-sg-food-story>> accessed 9 October 2022.

Findings and Discussion

A peek into Malaysia's House of Parliament debates from meetings in 2019³² and 2022³³ is shown in Table 2 and Table 3 below. The analysis used Hansard of 2019 and 2022, thus illustrating the shift in discussion topics between pre- and post-COVID-19.³⁴

Table 2: Analysis of the frequency of dimensional-level topics being debated in the House of Representatives in 2019³⁵

Dimension and Date	National Level				Household Level			
	Availability	Accessibility	Utilization	Stability	Availability	Accessibility	Utilization	Stability
12-Mar-19	√						√	√
13-Mar-19	√						√	
14-Mar-19			√			√	√	
18-Mar-19	√	√				√√		
19-Mar-19	√√√	√	√	√		√		
20-Mar-19	√√√√			√√	√			√√
21-Mar-19	√							√√√√√
25-Mar-19	√√	√√√						
27-Mar-19	√√	√						
28-Mar-19		√√	√√	√√√				
1-Apr-19	√			√				
3-Apr-19	√	√		√√				
4-Apr-19			√	√				
8-Apr-19		√		√				
9-Apr-19		√	√					
10-Apr-19		√		√√√√				
11-Apr-19				√√√√				
1-Jul-19				√				
2-Jul-19								
3-Jul-19	√						√	
4-Jul-19						√		
9-Jul-19	√√	√√			√		√√	
10-Jul-19								

32 2019: 1st meeting from 11 March to 11 April, 2nd meeting from 1 to 18 July, and 3rd meeting from 7 October to 5 December 2019.

33 2022: 1st meeting from 28 February to 24 March, 2nd meeting 18 July to 4 August, and 3rd meeting from 3 to 10 October 2022.

34 In 2020 and 2021, Parliament of Malaysia convened with adherence of tight procedures. See *Dinamika, Parlimen Malaysia Mendepani COVID-19* published by Parliament of Malaysia (2022). Hence, for an apple-to-apple comparison, this study chose 2019 and 2022 sessions for the analysis, where the sessions were convened normally.

35 The '√' represents each time food security was debated by a member of parliament.

Dimension and Date	National Level				Household Level			
	Availability	Accessibility	Utilization	Stability	Availability	Accessibility	Utilization	Stability
15-Jul-19		√		√				√
16-Jul-19								
17-Jul-19	√						√	
18-Jul-19	√√√	√√		√				
7-Oct-19								
8-Oct-19								
9-Oct-19	√√	√	√√			√	√√	
10-Oct-19								√
11-Oct-19		√			√			√
14-Oct-19	√√	√√		√√			√	
15-Oct-19	√√√	√√	√				√	√√
16-Oct-19	√√√	√√					√	√
17-Oct-19	√	√√						
21-Oct-19	√√√√	√	√				√	
22-Oct-19	√√	√				√√	√√	
23-Oct-19	√√	√				√	√	
24-Oct-19	√√	√		√√	√		√√	
29-Oct-19	√√√	√		√		√		
30-Oct-19	√							
31-Oct-19	√√√	√√	√√	√√			√	
4-Nov-19	√	√		√				
5-Nov-19		√						
6-Nov-19	√	√√		√				
7-Nov-19	√			√				
11-Nov-19	√	√√√						
12-Nov-19	√√√		√√		√		√√	
13-Nov-19		√	√	√			√	
14-Nov-19	√	√√						
18-Nov-19	√√	√√	√	√			√	
19-Nov-19		√		√			√	
20-Nov-19	√	√		√√√				
21-Nov-19	√√√	√√	√	√			√√	
25-Nov-19					√		√	
26-Nov-19	√							
27-Nov-19	√√			√	√			
28-Nov-19	√	√			√		√√	
2-Dec-19	√	√√						
3-Dec-19	√	√		√				
4-Dec-19	√		√√√√					
5-Dec-19			√					
Frequency Count	41	37	16	26	8	9	24	8

Table 3: Analysis of the frequency of dimensional-level topics being debated in the House of Representatives in 2022

Dimension and Date	NATIONAL LEVEL				HOUSEHOLD LEVEL			
	Availability	Accessibility	Utilization	Stability	Availability	Accessibility	Utilization	Stability
1-Mar-22	√	√						√
2-Mar-22				√				
3-Mar-22						√		
7-Mar-22					√			
8-Mar-22	√			√√				√
9-Mar-22		√√		√			√√	
10-Mar-22						√√		
14-Mar-22	√√	√						
15-Mar-22	√	√	√					
16-Mar-22				√				
21-Mar-22	√√√							
22-Mar-22				√				
24-Mar-22		√						
28-Mar-22								
18-Jul-22		√√√		√√√				√
19-Jul-22	√√	√√√√√√				√		√
20-Jul-22	√	√√√		√				√
21-Jul-22	√√	√√√					√√	
25-Jul-22	√			√	√			
26-Jul-22	√√√	√						
27-Jul-22		√√						
28-Jul-22		√						
1-Aug-22	√√√√√√√√√√	√√√	√	√	√√	√√		
2-Aug-22				√		√		
3-Aug-22			√√					
4-Aug-22	√	√		√	√			
Frequency Count	12	14	3	11	4	5	2	5

Generally, across both levels (national and household) and throughout all dimensions, the analysis reveals a trend with some similarities, characterized by a decrease in total frequencies.

National Level versus Households Level

Pre- and post-COVID-19 saw no significant change in the trend of the members of the House of Representatives discussions. In 2019, the national level discussion on food security monopolised the debate with 75 counts versus 30 counts for household level discussion. Meanwhile, in 2022, the figure was 79 to 20. This demonstrated that our parliamentarians

preferred to touch on food security issues at the national level compared to the household level. Politicians are expected to pick up on points that may nudge the public's attention, which is very typical and practised in the United Kingdom, too.³⁶ Most of the public would rather hear about what the government wants to do for food security at the national level because the people feel that national efforts will benefit them and the public as a whole. Household efforts, on the other hand, will only benefit a few, primarily the B40. The public's perception might be an understatement; however, what the public intensely perceived should not be taken lightly.

The public perception on Malaysia as a highly import-dependent country was epitomised in a particular event in 2019,³⁷ when the former Minister, Salahuddin Ayub, received a letter from a farmer named Wak Ibas. In his letter, Wak Ibas pleaded to the minister for the government to reconsider the country's food import policy. Wak Ibas claimed that he and his friends, referring to other farmers like himself, cannot compete with cheaper imported agricultural produce. The cheap import will kill small farmers and eventually affect the local production rate. Concluding his letter, Wak Ibas sarcastically proposed to change the ministry's slogan of '*Agriculture is a Business*' to '*Let's Just Import Agriculture Produce*' to show his disappointment.

Many pieces of the literature showed that food insecurity mostly impacts children and migrant workers.^{38,39,40} who are, unfortunately, a class of

36 Dace, Hermione, Brianna Miller, and Jess Lythgow. "Why Politicians Should Be Talking about Food." Institute for Global Change. Tony Blair, March 29, 2022. <<https://institute.global/policy/why-politicians-should-be-talking-about-food>> accessed 1 November 2022.

37 During the launching of '*Ministry of Agriculture and Agrobased Industries Way Forward: Priority and Strategy 2019 – 2020*' in February 14, 2019 at MAEPS, Serdang. The main author was present.

38 A. Wahab, 'The Outbreak of Covid-19 in Malaysia: Pushing Migrant Workers at the Margin,' (24 October 2020), *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590291120300620>> accessed 2 November 2022.

39 S. Verghis and the others, 'COVID-19 and Refugees in Malaysia: An NGO Response,' (31 March 2021): *Journal of Mental Health & Psychosocial Support in Conflict Affected Areas* 19, no. 1 pp. 15-20, <https://doi.org/10.4103/INTV.INTV_18_20> accessed at 4 November 2022.

40 S. Rengarajoo and S. T. Tan, 'Household Income and Its Correlation with Child Hunger During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Study,' (13 December 2022), *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, <<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2022.2157693>> accessed 8 November 2022.

people that are ineligible to vote in an election. Therefore, it explains the disinterest of our politicians in speaking more about households' food security, leaving the responsibilities to non-governmental organisations (NGOs).⁴¹

Trend Shift in the Dimensional Aspects

Availability tops the discussions in 2019 and 2022 at both levels, with counts of 32 and 36, followed by accessibility at 29 and 37. Both dimensions showed an upward trend. The stability dimension showed a linear trend with 18 and 19 counts in 2019 and 2022. The only dimension that showed a downward trend was utilisation; decreasing from 26 (2019) to 7 (2022). Food availability is an intermediate dimension, positioned between accessibility and utilisation. This fact seems logical since food availability is a precursor to food accessibility and food utilisation.

A study about availability⁴² demonstrated that unavailability of food consequently affected the public's purchasing power (becoming insufficient as the price hiked), inefficient distribution and inadequate use of food at the household level, which ultimately aggravated food insecurity worldwide.^{43,44}

Parliamentary Debates and 3-C Shocks Impacts on the Public

The public was very much affected by the disruption of supply chain and economic slowdown, which ultimately lead to loss of income and poverty. Some people who lost their income and jobs were subjected to health vulnerability, lower nutrition security, and lower affordability

41 Malaysia had good NGOs such as Malaysia Food Bank Foundation and Food Aid Foundation as well as faith-based groups aiming to close the widening gap left by government policies within the society.

42 E. B. Abbade, 'Availability, Access and Utilization: Identifying the Main Fragilities for Promoting Food Security in Developing Countries', (2 October 2017), *World Journal of Science, Technology and Sustainable Development* (Emerald Publishing Limited <<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/WJSTSD-05-2016-0033/full/html>> accessed 9 December 2022.

43 S. Gillespie, M. van den Bold, and J. Hodge, 'Nutrition and the Governance of Agri-Food Systems in South Asia: A Systematic Review,' (2019): *Food Policy* 82, no. Special Issue: Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia pp. 13-27, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2018.10.013>> accessed 9 December 2022.

44 E. B. Nchanji and C. K. Lutomia, 'Sustainability of the Agri-Food Supply Chain amidst the Pandemic: Diversification, Local Input Production, and Consumer Behavior' (28 October 2021): *Advances in Food Security and Sustainability* 6 pp. 211-229 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.af2s.2021.07.003>> accessed 23 November 2022.

to buy food. The disrupted supply chain, on the other hand, affected food availability. When viewed in a bigger picture, all of these factors contributed to food insecurity. Other implications to food security also include a growing consumption that is faster than the production capacity; leading to the need to source from imports to meet local demands.

From the analysis of the keywords used by the members of the House of Representatives, three (3) themes emerged, *i.e.*, (i) high food prices and demanding access to food; (ii) decreasing affordability of food; and (iii) lower availability of food. Therefore, it can be summed that the findings from the parliamentary debates reflected the actual situation that is affecting the public on the ground.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The most discussed topic of food security in the House of Representatives was identified, *i.e.*, food availability. A shift was observed, as during the post-COVID-19 parliamentary session, the topics of utilisation were less discussed compared to the pre-COVID-19 at both levels of national and households. The finding conforms with the flow of the food security dimensions hierarchy, *i.e.*, utilisation can only be discussed after the issues of availability and accessibility have been addressed. On the other matter, the spectrum of discussion on food security in the House of Representatives obtained from the analysis showed that it reflected and was in line with the current scenario, as shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Economists predicted that starting at the end of 2021, several foodstuffs in Malaysia will be in short supply and subject to increasing prices.⁴⁵ Both the price rise, and supply shortages were believed to result from supply chain glitches, the recent December 2021 floods, and post-COVID-19 labour shortages. The Russia – Ukraine war worsens the glitches in the global supply chain. Malaysia's agriculture sector has been stagnant over the past 20 years.⁴⁶ The government has been perceived as marginalising the agriculture sector by allocating meagre development funds under the national budget. Even well-known global fast-food franchise in

45 M. Hunter, 'Malaysia's Looming Food Crisis,' Free Malaysia today (FMT) (Letter to the Editor, 28 February 2022) <<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2022/02/28/malaysias-looming-food-crisis/>> accessed 11 November 2022.

46 G. S. M. Ali, 'Pandangan Bernas Dr Hasan Mohd Ali Tentang Pertanian 22 Tahun Lalu,' Bebas News (Minda Bebas, 14 April 2022) <<https://bebasnews.my/2022/04/14/pandangan-bernas-dr-hasan-mohd-ali-tentang-pertanian-22-tahun-lalu/>> accessed 19 November 2022.

Malaysia were faced with shortages of particular food items starting in January 2022. McDonald's was short on its fun fries,⁴⁷ while KFC had limited supply of its chicken.⁴⁸ The issue persisted until May 2022. As a result of this personal experience, an individual might assume that their level of food security at the individual level reflects the national food security situation. When this perception is replicated across the general population, it leads to a growing overall lack of confidence in the current local production. The public will continue to perceive Malaysia as an import-dependent nation. After all, this shortage symbolises the beginning of a much bigger national problem that would eventually force the Malaysian government to impose drastic measures. For instance, the government even relinquished approved permits (AP) for all types of food importation, banned chicken exports, and began stockpiling food, starting with chicken.⁴⁹

Fundamentally, the food security issue must be addressed to avoid disastrous consequences it could inflict upon Malaysia should the dietary needs of the citizens are denied under whatever circumstances. However, as there are severe structural issues involved, the Malaysian food crisis cannot be considered cyclical. Furthermore, since the scope of this study is limited only to the House of Representatives, future research using members of the Senate as the unit of analysis is highly recommended to complement these findings.

As previously explained, Malaysia was ranked 39th in the GFSI 2021 by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The ranking was far below resource-scarce countries such as Singapore, which came in at 15th, and even Qatar, at 24th. To the Malaysian government's credit, they have attempted to undertake a structural reform of local food production; however, it will take years before the public can expect tangible results. One (1) of the initiatives was the introduction of the *National Food Security Action*

47 M. Meisenzahl, 'More Global McDonald's Customers Are Facing French Fry Shortages as the Supply Chain Continues to Face Strain,' Business Insider (Home 1 Retail, February 5, 2022), <<https://www.businessinsider.com/mcdonalds-faces-french-fry-shortages-in-malaysia-indonesia-and-taiwan-2022-2>> accessed 1 November 2022.

48 During a debate in House of Representatives on 2 March 2022, former Jerlun Member of Parliament complained that he went to KFC but was told all chicken menu had already out of stock. See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9w40tcyOPOM>> accessed 22 October 2022.

49 'Tiada Lagi AP Untuk Import Bahan Makanan,' MalaysiaKini, (May 18, 2022) <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/621586>> accessed 13 November 2022.

Plan 2021-2025 on top of the existing *National Agrofood Policy 2021-2030* amidst public concern about the rising cost of food when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted supplies. Nonetheless, several past administrations in Malaysia had failed in achieving the targets of previous similar blueprints. The lack of participation from private entities, combined with the disorientation of government agencies, are the main problems that often besets the execution of efforts to address structural deficiencies at every level of the supply chain.

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