



Asia

Elections can be held in Malaysia when half of population is vaccinated against COVID-19: Khairy



Malaysia's Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin. (Photo: Facebook/Khairy Jamaluddin)

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia may be ready for a general election once half of its 32 million population is vaccinated, said Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin.

Speaking to CNA in an exclusive interview on the eve of the roll-out of the biggest national immunisation programme, Mr Khairy said he would not be surprised if national polls can be held by September, if not year end.

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"If we deliver on an effective immunisation programme and you've got a decent coverage, say 50 to 60 per cent of the population, and the Health DG feels that things are under control, then perhaps that's the right time," he said on Tuesday (Feb 23), referring to Health Ministry director-general Noor Hisham Abdullah.

"It's not impossible to imagine it could take place sometime this year ... by September at the earliest," he added.

Malaysia's COVID-19 vaccination programme will begin on Wednesday, with Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin being the first in line to be inoculated. Its goal is to vaccinate at least 80 per cent of its people within a year.

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A state of emergency was declared in January this year to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak and it will last until Aug 1 or earlier depending on the state of coronavirus infections. The parliament has been suspended until a time determined by the king.

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Mr Muhyiddin, who took over the top post in early 2020 in a power tussle in Putrajaya, has faced increasing pressure to dissolve the parliament and call for fresh elections. He has promised that an election will be held when the pandemic is over.

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Mr Khairy, the coordinating minister appointed by Mr Muhyiddin to oversee the vaccination programme, said he will need to hit the target of vaccinating 150,000 people per day by June, when the third phase is rolled out across more than 600 vaccination centres nationwide.

"Every country is doing this for the first time and on a scale that's unimaginable. In Malaysia, we are talking about vaccinating more than 23 million people through this year," he said.

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"I want to finish it by December this year, and that we need to hit a peak of about 150,000 or 160,000 a day ... provided we have the supplies," he added.

The government, he said, has spent almost RM3 billion to procure over 66.7 million doses of vaccines, enough for its population.

Half of the vaccines will come from Pfizer-BioNTech. Sinovac and AstraZeneca vaccines constitute about 20 per cent each, while the rest will come from Russian-made Sputnik V and single-dose CanSino.

On top of that, it is also ordering single-dose vaccines from Johnson & Johnson.

VACCINE HESITANCY IS A CHALLENGE

Mr Khairy estimated he will need at least RM1 billion for the vaccine roll-out that will be executed in three phases.

Phase one will cover some half a million frontliners, both medical and non-medical workers. Phase two targets 9.4 million elderly aged 65 and above as well as the high-risk groups, while phase three will involve 13.7 million people aged 18 and above, including foreigners.

While the vaccines are free for all, vaccination is voluntary.

With registration slated to begin on Mar 1, vaccine hesitancy remains one of the toughest challenges, said Mr Khairy.

"What I'm most concerned about (is) not the anti-vaxxers. But those who are on the fence."

"We've seen a lot of comments from Malaysian saying 'Give it to politicians first. After all they're the ones who bought the vaccines and they're the ones who want us to be vaccinated. So they should prove that the vaccines are safe.'"

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Containers carrying the first batch of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccines are unloaded from a plane at the MASKargo Complex in Sepang, Malaysia on Feb 21, 2021. (Photo: Reuters/Malaysia Information Department/Fandy Azlan)

That is why Mr Muhyiddin and Dr Noor Hisham are among first to be vaccinated, said Mr Khairy.

To further instil confidence, the minister said he will be vaccinated when the next batch of vaccines arrives.

Malaysia received its first batch of 312,390 doses of Pfizer vaccines on Sunday. It is scheduled to receive 1 million doses by March.

The bulk order from China's Sinovac, meanwhile, is scheduled to arrive on Feb 27 for fill and finish (bottling) locally.

So far, only Pfizer vaccines have been conditionally approved by the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency, while approvals for the rest of vaccines are pending.

► **[READ: Students in Malaysia to return to schools from Mar 1 onwards, says education minister \(/news/asia/students-malaysia-return-to-school-from-mar-1-onwards-covid-19-14235654?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna\)](#)**

VACCINES COULD END POLITICAL IMPASSE

With so many moving parts, Mr Khairy, who is a father of three sons, said he is kept awake most nights.

"My mind is thinking ahead, about what we need to anticipate about the level of inventory, about the vaccination centres, about the throughput rate."

"My mind is racing backwards to see whether or not we could have done things better, the day before. My mind is scanning the world to see what we can learn from other parts of the world, such as wasted vaccines that are thrown away because people aren't showing up at the vaccination centres," he told CNA.

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Workers transfer a container carrying the first batch of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccines at the MASKargo Complex in Sepang, Malaysia on Feb 21, 2021. (Photo: Reuters/Malaysia Information Department/Famer Roheni)

The minister is determined to overcome the challenges and vaccinate 80 per cent of the population across the country, including the most remote places in Sabah and Sarawak.

It is all systems go, he said, and he hoped to wrap things up before the end of the year.

“It’s part of our arsenal in defeating the pandemic. It’s not the only bullet of course. We have to continue for now with non pharmaceutical interventions, like wearing masks, ensuring physical distancing, having SOPs.”

“We have to ensure a robust testing and isolating protocol for those infected over the next few months until the vaccines really have a chance to show its effectiveness in the general population.”

The sooner the country achieves that, the faster the economy will rebound, he said.

“And as a politician. It will also end the impasse because we can have a general election,” he said.

Source: CNA/tx

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