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## Focus on Asia: The quiet despair of life in Macau



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News headlines coming out of Macau this week focused on the government's announcement that it had awarded provisional concessions to the six existing casino operators, each lasting 10 years. This announcement removed a great deal of uncertainty for those operators, and they can now move forward with implementation of their 10-year business plans.

What remains decidedly uncertain is how long it will take for Macau's tourism industry to recover from nearly three years of onerous restrictions designed to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. That uncertainty not only affects the pace of the casino industry's recovery but the lives of Macanese residents who have endured economic and social hardship, restrictions on travel, and a near constant fear that the slightest sign of an outbreak could bring on further quarantines and lockdowns.



It is difficult for westerners to fully appreciate what life has been like for Macanese residents during the past 33 months, living under the government's Zero-COVID policy. A recent event casts a light on how on any day, at any moment, life can become extremely difficult. For example, on October 30, 2022, on what was a typical Sunday, a dealer at the MGM Cotai tested positive for COVID-19. That prompted health authorities to immediately lock down the entire integrated resort, which at the time had over 1,500 guests and employees. Those people were not allowed to leave the building until Wednesday, November 1, and only after everyone tested negative. Of those 1,500 people, 81 people were transferred to a medical hotel for further observation because they were deemed to have been in close proximity to the infected person.

One can argue that with 1,390 rooms and suites, there are far worse places to get caught in a lockdown than in a luxury hotel, and one can assume that the MGM staff did an outstanding job making those guests and employees as comfortable as possible – yet, it underscores how quickly normal life can be disrupted by one random infection.

Those 720,000 Macau residents that were fortunate not to have been in the casino the afternoon of the lockdown were nonetheless required to undergo three rounds of daily testing. Those tests were mandatory, and required residents to make an appointment at an assigned facility, endure waiting on line, and of course waiting for the results of their tests.

A similar incident took place two weeks later at the Harborview Hotel in Macau's Fisherman's Wharf district. In that incident, a hotel guest visiting from the mainland was diagnosed with COVID-19, which again prompted authorities to seal off the building with guests and employees inside. They were then forced to remain inside and subject to additional rounds of testing. Once free to leave, they were subject to certain restrictions as indicated by the QR code on their phones.

Daily life in Macau has become an exercise in controlling anxiety. At the heart of that anxiety is the QR code system. Similar to those systems found in mainland China, each resident is required

to have an app on their mobile device that displays a QR code. Whenever one enters a public building, that QR code is scanned and one of three colors appears: green, yellow or red. Green is good, yellow means go home; red is bad. On any given day, a resident could have their QR code scanned a dozen times and with each scan, a moment of anxiety occurs.

In addition to the fear of getting trapped in a lockdown or having one's QR code flash red, there is the ritual of testing. Depending on the number of known infections, those tests could occur once or twice a week or daily. Each test requires an appointment, time set aside to wait on line, and the anxiety that comes with awaiting the results.

Not surprisingly, the government's Zero COVID policy has impacted residents' mental health. Suicides are up over 70 percent from 2021, which in itself was not a particularly good year for suicides. While suicides are the extreme outcome of living under Zero COVID, the policy adds to the general malaise of the population. A decision to attend a public event, or even a small gathering, is weighed against the chance that one might come in proximity with someone who eventually tests positive, causing their QR code to turn red.

Prior to the pandemic, Macau was a vibrant city. Cafes, restaurants and shops were filled with locals and tourists. Today, that energy is muted. Perhaps the hardest part of life in Macau is living in a tourism-based economy with very few tourists. While the casino industry has done an admirable job of keeping their staff employed, and the government has been generous in providing subsidies to its citizens, those benefits provide the bare minimum. So in addition to living with the possibility that at any moment people could find themselves in an untenable situation of a getting caught in a lockdown or having their QR code turn red, there is the economic hardship that everyone continues to endure.

The hardest part of life under the government's Zero COVID policy is trying to guess when things will get better. Until it does, people in Macau continue to live on; many make the best of it while others live in a state of quiet despair.

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