

Explaining the rise of hate speech aimed at Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia

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Rohingya refugees have been at the receiving end of hate speech during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia by almost all segments of the society, most especially those from middle and upper classes in the country. A posting that was falsely attributed to head of The Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organization Malaysia (Mehrom), Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani, triggered death threats and hate speech against the Rohingya community (FMT Reporters, 2020). The Malaysian ambassador for the European Rohingya Council, Tengku Emma Zuriana Tengku Azmi, reported receiving threats and her personal information, including car plate and identification number were widely disseminated through various online platforms (Martin, 2020). The culmination of these hate speech phenomena was further exacerbated when the Malaysian Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) instructed a boat carrying approximately 200 Rohingya refugees back into deep waters out of fears that the Rohingyas might be bringing more infections of the COVID-19 into the country (Malaymail, 2020). It was no surprise that certain quarters were apprehensive with receiving the Rohingya refugees, what was of concern was that many of the middle class Malaysians too joined in the bandwagon of hate towards the Rohingyas. There are several regional and domestic structural factors that may have contributed to this negative perception.

Concerns over imported cases - Regional Factors

During the Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO), Najib Tun Razak took a one hundred eighty and went against his earlier policy of being in solidarity with the *Ummah* (Islamic community) by being receptive of Rohingya refugees during his administration, when he was quoted saying, 'Sudah diberikan betis, nak peha pulak,' (Give them an inch and they'll take a mile'). This perception was shared by administrators of the Perikatan Nasional. It is important to highlight that out of the 178,000 refugees in Malaysia, 153,000 are from Myanmar and 101,000 are Rohingya refugees. It was reported that the Southwest China's Yunnan Province 1,941 kilometer borderline shared with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam had been on high alarm with regards to border control with strict administration measures being imposed by the Chinese and Myanmar governments (Shan, 2020). During the November 2016 civic outbreak in northern Myanmar, many Burmese fled the country to seek refuge in the temporary shelter in Wading, Yunnan, China. People from the two states do not only share a common border, but many have relatives living on both sides of the fence. Before the outbreak, Myanmar, had direct flights each week from Wuhan and more than 300,000 Chinese tourists visited Myanmar in 2019 (Nachemson, 2020). This excludes the 10,000 Myanmar workers that crossed the Chinese border for work daily. Concerns that infections may be rampant and undetected could have influenced the perception of regular Malaysians, notwithstanding the middle and upper classes in the country.

The 'Othering' of Rohingyas - Domestic Issues

Extreme poverty and lack of opportunity leads communities with no access to proper education, hospitalization and jobs have led them to be the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 disease. That has led them to rely on daily waged odd jobs. Understandably, the pandemic took a toll on their income during the MCO (Movement Control Order). Secondly, the housing facilities are typically cramped and unhygienic (Sandanasamy, Paavilainen & Baruah, 2020). When it was reported that 78 percent of the COVID-19 as of late May were mainly migrant and foreign workers, this further exacerbated the perception that these groups were a threat to the general wellbeing of regular Malaysians (Loheswar, 2020). Misinformation and hate speech over social media further fueled hatred by regular Malaysians toward the Rohingya community particularly (Ding, 2020). When Ismail Sabri Yaakob, Minister of Defense, said he was going to detain and isolate undocumented migrant and foreign workers, Malaysians were rather supportive of this move (CodeBlue, 2020). It was implored that the government will take those dirty, dangerous and difficult jobs foreign and migrant workers typically do, and offer it up to those Malaysians that have lost their jobs (Nadirah, 2020). Local business people still have problems getting Malaysians to do those jobs, and the reliance on these groups will continue.

Extreme poverty and lack of opportunities have also made the Rohingyas vulnerable to illicit activity and extremism. There have reports of Rohingyas being used as drug mules from the Shan State into Bangladesh (Ginkel, 2020). The Arakan Army help smuggle Ya ba (mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine) from Shan State into Rakhine and later use the Rohingyas as drug mules to be smuggled into Cox Bazaar, Bangladesh. While there are no concrete evidences that the Rohingyas are further being exploited into bringing Ya Ba into Thailand, Malaysia and other neighboring countries, discounting these possibilities would be erroneous. Extreme poverty in exchange for a promise to be smuggled to these countries can be a driving force.

Locally, the Rohingyas have been recruited as drug pushers and turf war has led to shootings at a wholesale market here in Kuala Lumpur. Local smugglers have found the Rohingyas to be readily expendable in comparison to the local recruits. Five were caught four years ago on drug smuggling charges. They also have showed signs of being vulnerable to being recruited by terrorist groups like ISIS (Fernandez & Greg, 2020). These isolated incidences in comparison to the large number of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, does play a role in influencing negative perceptions toward the community.

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