

THE ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA: ISSUES, APPROACHES, NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Ruhanas Harun ⁴

ABSTRACT

The 2016 crackdown of the Rohingya ethnic group by the Myanmar military has forced an unusually large number of them to flee the country and ended up as refugees in the neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. For a long period of time, Malaysia has received many Rohingya refugees, but the 2016 crisis in the Rakhine state not only resulted in a high number of Rohingya refugees arriving on its shores, but also created significant impact on the way the authorities and local population deal with the issue of Rohingya refugees. This time, not only were they allowed to land in Malaysia, but their presence in the country is not accompanied by a suspicious or hostile reception. Malaysia is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention on Refugees, but it has provided humanitarian assistance to the refugees beyond expectation. It has also brought to the world attention the plight of the Rohingyas in Myanmar and in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. The aim of this paper is to discuss on the major issues and challenges facing the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and the implications of their presence towards the country's national security and societal harmony.

Keywords: *Rohingya refugees, security, radicalisation, humanitarian assistance, religious solidarity, social integration.*

INTRODUCTION

The Rohingyas has been described as the most persecuted minority in the world. It is estimated that there are about 1.2 million Rohingyas in Myanmar and they are predominantly found in the Rakhine state (Arakan) (Ekeh & Smith, 2007). However, as a result of the persecution by the Myanmar military, many have fled the country to end up in the neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Their plight has received a lot of attention from the

⁴Prof Dr. Ruhanas Harun is a Professor at the Department of Strategic Studies, National Defence University of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur and a Distinguished Fellow at the Malaysian Armed Forces Command and Staff College. Email: ruhanas10@gmail.com

international community including the United Nation (UN), several governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who showed support and solidarity with this stateless group of people. Bangladesh, being the nearest neighbour to Myanmar, is the main recipient of Rohingya refugees. Today, it is estimated that there are more than 600,000 Rohingyas in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Other countries in ASEAN such as Malaysia and Thailand too have received a large number of these refugees. In Malaysia, it is estimated that there are more than 60,000 Rohingya refugees (Jay, Fong & Yunus, 2017). Their presence in Malaysia has been welcomed by both the majority of the public and the government, especially after the 2016 military crackdown of Rohingyas in Myanmar. Many organisations, both local and Rohingya-led have been established in the country to cater for their various needs, both at the basic survival level and in the areas of education and socialisation. Their arrival in large numbers and the publicity surrounding the persecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar resulted in heightened attention to their presence in this country. There is obviously a religious solidarity, which formed the basis of the local reception towards the Rohingyas.

While Malaysia is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention 1951 and its 1967 Protocol on Refugees, it has taken measures to provide humanitarian assistance to these refugees. To better deal with issues related to the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, the government recently introduced several measures and policies to facilitate their stay here, and possibly integrate those who may choose to stay in this country. Such measures include allowing Rohingya children to study in government schools, as well as permitting Rohingyas to work in certain economic sectors such as in the plantations. The Rohingya refugees in Malaysia have formed associations to look after the welfare of their members, collect donations and work together with local and international NGOs. However, in the long term, the unregulated presence of a large number of displaced people without proper governance would necessarily entail negative consequences on the social stability and the national security of the nation. One of these would be the danger of radicalisation among these refugees given the various conditions that may facilitate such trend.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE ROHINGYAS

Myanmar is a Buddhist majority country, with only 4% of its population comprising of Muslim communities (Dovert & Madinier, 2003), including 1.2 million Rohingya Muslims. The origins of this Muslim community in Myanmar was said to come from traders and mercenaries who were of Turkish, Iranian or Indian origins who gradually established themselves in the kingdom (Dovert & Madinier, 2003). Historically, the Arakan state was an independent kingdom

until 1785 where there was a strong Muslim presence consisting of merchants, mercenaries, as well as the Sufis who brought with them the Islamic culture that flourished since the 16th century. The number of Muslims in Arakan increased following the victories of Arakan rulers in wars in the region. This gave them the opportunity to bring thousands of Muslim Bengalis into the Arakan region along the Bangladesh-Myanmar borders of today (Dovort & Madinier, 2003). The number of Bengalis in the area also increased under British rule when they encouraged their migration from Chittagong. They were brought in to work not only as workers, but also as officers in the British administration. Some contended that it was the massive implantation of this Indian-Muslim group in the majority Buddhist community that created frictions between Muslims and Buddhists (Dovort & Madinier, 2003). Migration in and out of what is now known as Bangladesh continued throughout the British rule.

In the early 20th century, there were already tension between the local Burmese community and what was perceived as “foreign migrants”, although these were not openly manifested (Dovort & Madinier, 2003). Opposition by the Rohingya community to the Burmese government came in the form of revolt in April 1948, under the banner of ‘Mujahid’. Their complaints were many, including unjust treatment, refusal by Burmese army to accept Rohingyas, accusation by Burmese authorities that they were Pakistanis infiltrators, removal of Muslims from administrative posts and from police service, etc. Burmese government oppression against the Rohingyas whom they refer to as “Bengalis”⁵ continued under successive regimes in the post-independent Burma. In 1977, the government of Myanmar officially categorised the Rohingyas as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh since they did not possess any document as proof of citizenship (Abu Talib Ahmad, 2008). At that time, such claim was difficult to refute as there were among the Rohingya population many Biharis and seasonal labourers from Chittagong following the slowdown of oil and gas industry in the Bay of Bengal (Abu Talib Ahmad, 2008). This problem became more complicated because among the Rohingyas themselves, many had no documents to certify that they were citizens of Myanmar (Abu Talib Ahmad, 2003). Many reasons accounted for this situation, including the attitude of Rohingyas who did not take seriously the registration of citizenship exercise, which was done by the central government after 1948. In addition, the local registration office failed to keep a proper record of the registration. This problem became worse as the Rohingya population in Arakan increased.

⁵The term Rohingya is not used by Myanmar authorities, and prohibit anyone from using the term.

The military government continued to discriminate the Rohingyas by instituting various measures of control which restricted their freedom of movement, organisation of the community life, economic activities and limited their participation in national politics. Such measures marginalised them to the extent that when there was a possibility during the 1990s to join the democratic struggle against the military regime under the National League for Democracy (NLD), not many Rohingya leaders were interested to do so. Many Rohingya leaders channelled their political aspiration through organisations or movements which operated privately or in cooperation with other Rohingya groups. Such movements include the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front formed in 1950s, then considered as a moderate movement. Others were more militant, such as the Rohingya Patriotic Front, Rohingya Liberation Army, the Arakan People Liberation Party and the Harkat Jihadul Islam (Abu Talib Ahmad, 2003). These organisations were often based in the areas of the origins of members within the Rakhine state, therefore there was no 'national' movement of the Rohingyas beyond the areas of their origins. Such pattern can also be found in many associations established by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, creating rivalry among the associations and leaders.

THE POLICIES OF MYANMAR GOVERNMENT AND RADICALISATION AMONG ROHINGYAS IN ARAKAN

Tense between the Rohingya community and the government of Myanmar has been brewing long before the exodus of 2016. One of the factors that led to this friction was the lack of understanding about the history of Rohingyas' implantation in Arakan and the failure of integrating them into the Burmese political nation. Their marginalisation has led to the gradual radicalisation of this minority group. Unlike other minorities such as the Karen ethnic minority group who had access to Western press and organisations that served to make their voice heard, the Rohingyas did not enjoy such external support from the West. Even the support from Arab and Muslim countries such as Bangladesh and Malaysia were not enough to deter the government of Myanmar from persecuting Rohingyas (Dovort & Madinier, 2003). The Muslims in Arakan formed a relatively homogenous community within their own limited territory, which is economically deprived and suspected by the government of harbouring latent irredentism, built on the Bengali ethnic or cultural basis (Dovort & Madinier, 2003). The citizenship Law of 15 October 1982 further alienated the Rohingya community, as they were excluded from

the 135 ethnic groups that have rights to citizenship. After the refugee crisis of 1991- 1992, the government of Myanmar and Bangladesh sought to resolve the issue of Rohingya refugees flowing into Bangladesh. They reached two agreements in which Bangladesh will repatriate the Rohingya refugees and Myanmar government agreed to allow back those who can prove that they are Myanmar nationals. Extremist groups denounced this agreement, as they did with the recent agreement on repatriation from Bangladesh to Myanmar.

The repression of Rohingyas by the Myanmar authorities is most evidence in the north of Arakan, especially in the area of Sittwe, the state capital. The policy of systematic repression by the Myanmar government can be summed up in the following four points, namely the refusal of citizenship rights, economic marginalisation, assimilation policy and encouraging individuals to leave the country (Dovort & Madinier, 2003). Although the repression by the Myanmar government is not exclusively religious, religion became the natural vehicle of protest (Dovort & Madinier, 2003). The separatist tendency of the Muslims in Arakan led the Myanmar government of SLORC/SPDC to systematically use force and violence against this community. This policy constituted the first risk factor towards radicalisation of Islam in Arakan (Dovort & Madinier, 2003).

The militarisation of the Rohingya cause has spurred the establishment of different Muslim organisations in Arakan. The politico-religious organisation, Rohingya Jam'iyyat al Ulama founded in 1936, demanded a special status for the northern Arakan region where the majority of the population were Muslims. In 1947, the Mujahed Party Arakan led by Jaafar Hussain or Jaafar Kawal demanded the creation of an autonomous Muslim state within the Union of Myanmar. Another group made up of religious leaders appeared in 1948, preaching jihad against the infidels. Muslims also became frustrated and angered by the failed promise of the British to give them an autonomous region for their help during the Second World War (Dovort & Madinier, 2003). To add insult to injury, in 1961, the Burmese army directly took control of the northern Arakan region and reduced significantly the mujahid resistance. Other Muslim groups claiming autonomy or independence emerged later on. In 1964, the Rohingya Independent Front (RIF) under B.A Jafar was formed, and like previous Rohingya organisations, also demanded autonomy within the federation of Myanmar. This RIF later became the RIA (Rohingya Independent Army) in 1969. Other groups were established, but with the same demand for autonomy. Among these groups was the Rohingya Patriotic Front founded in 1973, which was split into two in 1978 to become the Rohingya Liberation

Front and the Rohingya Patriotic Front. These groups mobilised arms and supporters from refugee camps in Bangladesh (Dovert & Madinier, 2003).

The failure of Rohingya groups to obtain concessions from the Myanmar government led to further radicalisation of Rohingyas in their struggle. In the mid-1980s, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) moved from political activities to military combat after the refugee exodus of 1991-1992. The existence and activities of this group provided an opportunity and an excuse for the Myanmar military to launch attacks against the Muslim minority in Arakan. Many of the Rohingya militant organisations that came later had their origins in the earlier movements, such as the ARNO (Arakan Rohingya National Organisation) which was a fusion of RSO and ARIFF (Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front) and led by former ARIFF Chief, Nurul Islam. But later in 2000, ARNO joined in an alliance with a Buddhist organisation, the National Independent Party of Arakan (NIPA) to form the Alliance for the Independence of Arakan. Their aim was to unite all people of Arakan in their fight against the military rule and create a united community regardless of race and religion (Dovert & Madinier, 2003). As of the 1980s, the SLORC which was ruling the country intensified its oppression against all opposition in the country, including the movement for democracy led by Aung San Su Kyi. The military crackdown on Rohingyas continued even after Aung San Su Kyi and her movement had their legitimacy finally restored in Myanmar. Since then Aung San Su Kyi had been reluctant to mention the issue and discrimination of Rohingyas in Myanmar (Radio France Internationale, 2017). The seemingly 'insolvable' politico-religious issue of the Rohingyas continues to draw the attention of the international community.

BECOMING REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA AND THE LOCAL RECEPTION

The Rohingyas have been coming to Malaysia as refugees since as early as 1970s together with the coming of Cambodian refugees who left their country because of the conflict in Indochina. For the Rohingyas, their arrival in Malaysia was the result of the push and pull factors. In the 1990s, they came for economic reason, like most other migrants to Malaysia. Most of the Rohingyas who came to Malaysia in the 1980s came illegally through the Thai-Malaysia and the Thai- Myanmar borders. The peace and security in Malaysia, economic opportunities and being a Muslim country became factors that attracted the Rohingyas. Many of them who had been in the country since 1980s, were able



to integrate well into the local society, especially in the northern and on the east coast of Malaysia (Kedah, Kelantan). They have learned to speak Malay which facilitated their interactions with the locals and some married local women. While the earlier waves of refugees managed to quietly settle down in many parts of Malaysia, the recent arrivals do not seem to find the same ease in integrating into the local community. For some reasons, before the 2016 crisis, the presence of Rohingyas in this country did not get much attention of ordinary Malaysians. However, the atrocities committed upon them back in their country in 2016 changed the attitude of Malaysians. They became more aware of the plight of Rohingyas and became more involved in efforts to provide assistance to these refugees. The rally organised in Kuala Lumpur in December 2016 to show support for the Rohingyas was attended by many NGOs, individuals and members of the Malaysian government including the Prime Minister (Rashikin, 2016). Since then, many activities including seminars and talks have been organised to highlight their plight. More importantly, these activities and the presence of Rohingyas in the country are given ample coverage in the media, reflecting the welcome extended to them by Malaysians. It is also to be observed that since 2016, the religious factor became increasingly important as a bond of solidarity between Malaysian Muslims and their co-religionists who fled Myanmar.

SURVIVING AS REFUGEES AND ITS CHALLENGES

The current Rohingya refugee population in Malaysia is estimated at 63,000. While this is small in comparison to the more than half a million of them in Bangladesh, the challenges for the Malaysian authorities to accommodate them is equally huge. Once in Malaysia, the Rohingyas' main preoccupation was survival. Today there are many NGOs and Rohingya associations that offer help to Rohingyas to start life in a foreign country. Many of these Rohingya associations are unregistered and do not have many members, nevertheless they are useful in providing some guidance and direction for Rohingyas to familiarise with the new conditions and challenges as refugees. Some of these organisations are also supported by local NGOs and individuals who are sympathetic to their plight.

Malaysian NGOs play a significant role in accommodating the needs of the Rohingya refugees in the country. They are actively involved in support for Rohingyas through shelter, education, social welfare programs, setting up schools for Rohingya children, creating awareness and sensitising the

Malaysian public to the issue of refugees. However, there are Rohingya associations that did not provide useful services to the community. Instead these associations are run or led by unscrupulous individuals claiming to work for the sake of the Rohingya refugees, who not only failed to deliver, but became opportunistic. The generosity of Malaysians is legendary, and this in itself became a contributing factor for opportunism and lack of accountability. Funds can be obtained easily, especially from Malays or Muslims who believed in extending help as a way of accumulating '*pahla*' (reward). Another problem common to Rohingya associations is the rivalry among these groups to recruit members and control these associations that would enable them to gain access to funding and networking from groups or individuals. Some of these community leaders are illiterate, speak little Malay or English, but appointed themselves to lead and manage activities for their community and to make their position 'unassailable', they will solicit the support of some politicians to legitimise their decisions or actions ⁶.

Many Rohingya organisations have surfaced in Malaysia in recent years. They include Majlis Rohingya Malaysia (MRM), Rohingya Society In Malaysia (RSM), UNIROD, Majlis Ulama Rohingya, Rohingya Information Centre, Community Rohingyas Islam Pro-Democracy Organisation (CRIPDO), Arakan Democratic Process, Ethnic Rohingya Committee, National Democratic Party for Human Rights-Rohingya, United Islam for Rohingya Development Arakan Group and many others ⁷. Majority of these organisations are to be found in Selangor and the Federal Territory, while some like UNIROD is a continuation of similar organisation in Arakan. Some of these associations established in Malaysia have few members, sometimes with the committee at times being larger than the ordinary members. Another feature of these organisations is that they are based on the regions where members originate in the Arakan, thus further splitting rather than uniting the Rohingya community. Frictions between these associations sometimes occur because of rivalry to gain influence and recognition by local Islamic religious authorities for the purpose of obtaining permissions to preach.

A major concern for the Rohingyas is the lack of opportunity for the education of their children. Many schools have sprung up, established by Rohingyas themselves and supported by local NGO's and institutions especially in

⁶ Experience of the writer on the same school in Sri Kembangan who insisted he will stay on at the school after getting a letter to move out from the premise. His explanation is that he had received guarantee from a politician in the state that he can stay on.

⁷Field work 2010.

providing funding and material support. Some of these schools are poorly equipped, badly maintained and managed. These schools are privately owned and run by Rohingyas, sometimes two or more schools run by members of the same family. There is no standard curriculum and no government control over these schools. Although they are established purportedly as schools for Rohingya children, there are some who take in non-Rohingya children to increase enrolment and for the purpose of seeking donations. To make up the numbers, they accept children of undocumented Indonesian, Bangladeshi or other Burman Muslims parents. This practise is contrary to the immigration rules of Malaysia, which prohibit harbouring, abetting, aiding or accommodating undocumented migrants (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2018). In their eagerness to help the Rohingyas, local NGOs and Rohingya associations have attempted to establish identity cards for the Rohingyas, which contravenes the government regulation on the issuance of identity cards. In sum, the haphazard manner in managing the Rohingyas in Malaysia has created many problems and gave room to exploitation and manipulation by unscrupulous groups abetting and aiding undocumented foreigners, undermining national security. If not checked, the trend will continue to grow and will be difficult to control once it is out of hand.

THE DANGER OF RADICALISATION

For Malaysia, there is a danger that the openness and flexibility in welcoming the Rohingya refugees in the country maybe misused and exploited. The peace and political stability of the nation has so far been maintained because of the harmony among races in this country. Malaysians, whatever their ethnic origins or faiths, have understood the value of unity and have a shared understanding and aspirations as citizens of this country. But this is not so with Rohingyas who are not only alien to the culture and the political system of this system of this country, but also do not necessarily hope to be integrated here in the long run. For many of them, especially with the educated ones, they hope to go to a third country in search of a better life. Among the less privileged, there are those who dream of going back to their villages in Arakan. For others, they would prefer to remain in Malaysia if allowed to do so. But for many, they are either too traumatised or too ignorant to think of other options and future direction in their lives other than to manage a day to day existence in this country. Amidst these uncertainties, hope gave way to desperation and anger. They are bitter at being unjustly treated in their own country, and angry that even in Malaysia, where they were initially welcomed, their fate is now no better.

The social media is one way for them to express their frustration and anger. Social media chat groups such WhatsApp, Facebook and twitter are commonly used to communicate these messages to others. In Malaysia, mobile phones and sim cards are easily available and relatively cheap, thus allowing easy access to these new media platforms. One social media chat group ⁸, created by a Malaysian has become a popular 'voice' for the Rohingyas to air their grievances, either vis-à-vis the Myanmar government, the Malaysian authorities and the rest of the world on the dire situation they are in. A frequently asked question by Rohingyas in this group is that why a Muslim country like Malaysia cannot accept and accord rights and privileges to Rohingyas as fellow Muslims? Some have adopted the concept of Al Ansar and Mujahirin when talking about the relationship that should be established between the locals and the Rohingya refugees. Many of these refugees do not understand the laws and regulations of this country pertaining to undocumented foreigners, nor the sensitivities in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. Their bitterness and hatred against those who caused their sufferings in Myanmar and the failure of the international community, including Malaysia to rectify the situation created the feeling that the world must take responsibility to compensate them. Such thinking and demands are widely expressed in meetings and social media.

Although it is uncertain that the extent of the potential threat of the presence of Rohingyas towards national security in similar manner to how illegal immigrants were perceived in the late 1980s to the 1990s, it is not an exaggeration to conclude that if their presence were not well managed, they can be a liability to the country's national security (Harun, 2016). One major concern is the danger of radicalisation among the Rohingyas. As refugees, they brought with them, not only their own way of life, political culture and socialisation, but also a history of standing up for their rights and expression of their bitterness as evidenced in the past movements against the state of Myanmar. The enthusiasm showed by Malaysians in their expression of support for Rohingya refugees have also been interpreted politically by some Rohingya leaders as support for their cause.

The manifestation of anger, despair and bitterness as expressed by many Rohingyas through social media has taken an unmistakably religious dimension. Veiled mobilisation of Rohingyas is conducted through social media⁹. Articulations of Islam as a tool of mobilisation and demand for rights surfaced explicitly on social media. The more radical Rohingyas have likened

⁸WhatsApp group consisting of Rohingyas in Malaysia and Malaysians

their presence and plight here as that existed between the Muhajirin from Makkah and Ansar of Madinah as such, they should be accorded rights due to the Muhajirin¹⁰. They have questioned and in some cases rejected educational facilities for their children provided by non-Muslim organisations in Malaysia.¹¹ Despite being dispersed physically in most states of the Peninsula Malaysia, and regardless of their socio-economic or territorial origins in Myanmar, Rohingya refugees have managed to establish a “networked” organisational structure through social media and associations. They communicate their situation and demands through the various associations of their own facilitated by many local NGOs and individuals who are sympathetic to their plight, though not necessarily aware of the political content veiled in those religious solidarity messages and gestures. While the number of Rohingya leaders engaged in such manifestation is still a minority, their ability to mobilise others who share their vengeance and frustration cannot be underestimated¹². This worrying trend of radicalisation among Rohingyas is still at its infancy, partly because most of them are still coping with the basic needs of being refugees.

With the large numbers of this disenfranchised and vulnerable Rohingya refugee population dispersed in many Muslim countries, there is fear that they might be ‘recuperated’ by terrorist or extremist groups internationally. In January 2001, several ARNO leaders were arrested by the Myanmar military and accused of being connected to Islamist organisations internationally. The event of September 11, 2001 which created the “Islamophobia” atmosphere worldwide, has also provided an opportunity for the Myanmar government to cast doubt and suspicion on the activities of the Muslim groups in the country. The pretext of the Islamic threat in Myanmar does not augur well for the Muslim community in Myanmar, especially for the Rohingyas who had a history of conflict against the central government. So far in Malaysia, there has been no incident of violent manifestation to express their dissatisfaction. But the state needs to exercise more control on the extremist tendencies of

¹⁰“Many NGOs are enemies of our religion, they always think of extinguishing Allah’s religion and its prophet, then destroy the Akidah of our stateless people”. Personal communication, January 10, 2018. (Undisclosed sources)

¹¹Before this there were many schools for Rohingya children run by non-Muslim organisations such as Tzuchi and Suaram etc.

¹²“How long you Rohingyas want to remain refugees? Another 29 years? There is no end to just appealing for international aid and pressure. The main issue is that opposition to the Myanmar military leaders and Aung San Su Kyi. You cannot remain outside your territories, you must look for a leader to lead the struggle, maybe get the training from outside or within in clandestine manner. You need people who are well versed in: leadership, logistic, combat, weapons, clandestine point of entry, food/ medicines, fund raising etc. Look back at history : leaders who have been overthrown by people, majority Islamic guerrilla groups, Muslims who have rebelled, how they recruit their fighters etc. ” translated from Malay , personal communication, WhatsApp (undisclosed source)

some Rohingya groups or individuals in this country if it wants to avoid the germination of organised militancy to express dissatisfaction. Resentment and dissatisfaction are known to be breeding ground for extremism and militancy (Agus, 2014). There are several disgruntlement among the Rohingya community in Malaysia. These include the issue of UNHCR which is not recognised by local authorities, thus unable to provide them with security. Being undocumented, they fear that the authorities might arrest and punish them. Another constant source of worry for the Rohingya refugees is getting jobs that can help them sustain their livelihood. Recently the government introduced a policy allowing them to work in certain sectors of the economy, such as in the plantations. But this proved to be not popular with the Rohingyas. According to one of their leaders who helped to source out workers, out of 300 interviewed, only 14 agreed to accept the job in the plantation sector (Abdul Ghani, personal communication, January 13, 2018).

However, the biggest issue for the Rohingya community here is the future and education of their children (Abdul Hamid Musa Ali, 2011). The government previously prohibited Rohingya children from entering government schools, so the only way for them to get education was through Rohingya private schools, which many parents could not afford. Also the curriculum in these schools are basic, mainly focus on religious education and does not prepare the children for skills that they could later acquire and use. Towards the end of 2017, the government rescinded the policy and announced that Rohingya children may enrol in government schools. A Rohingya father lamented his concern about the uncertain future of his children resulting from the lack of education, comparing them to cows¹³. Unemployed, poor, uneducated and fed by bitterness, the Rohingyas, especially their youths, will remain at the margins of the society. There is high potential of them being a source of social ills such as involvement in undesirable and criminal activities as a result of this situation.

It can be summed up that the unregulated presence of Rohingyas in Malaysia resulted in negative impact for the country. Firstly, it will lead to an increase in the number of stateless people in the country which will not only lead to national security problem for Malaysia, but also may tarnish the image of the country internationally as it is not able to resolve the issues related to their presence in the country. The continuous entry of Rohingyas consisting of young women who are in the age of procreation will inevitably lead to the rise of refugees or

¹³ “Saya ini lembu, anak saya lembu dan cucu cicit saya pun akan menjadi lembu,” as lamented by a Rohingya parent. Personal communication, Dr Azizah Kassim, researcher on Rohingyas.

stateless population in Malaysia. Secondly, their children, without access to education, work and hope for a better future may end up in deviant activities ranging from begging, gambling, drug abuse and petty thefts. Thirdly, from the national security perspective, their presence has been associated with migrant smuggling and human trafficking, either as victims or perpetrators. The recent discovery of mass graves in Wan Kelian, Kedah, proved to be Rohingya victims of migrant smuggling, is a grim testimony of such unwanted activities (Jay, Fong & Yunus, 2017). Another security concern is activities involving the falsification of identity documents, which had been carried out by some Rohingya groups in collusion with some unscrupulous locals. As they are without document and appropriate legal status in Malaysia, they have no access to rights such as having banking account, driving license, work or business permit, leaving them in a limbo. The job, of policing these illegal activities also impose a high cost on Malaysian authorities in terms of energy, time and resources. Related to the problem of security is the potential for radicalised groups to make this country a base of operation for their activities. Finally, internationally, the image of Malaysia will be tarnished by accusations from various quarters that Malaysia has not done much to rectify human rights violation in the country ¹⁴.

Apart from the obvious national security problems mentioned above, the unregulated presence of a huge number of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia is likely to create a divisive political impact. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi religious nation whose existence and national security depends very much on the harmonious co-existence of its ethnically diverse population. The fact that the Rohingya crisis is framed within the conflict between Muslim Rohingyas and majority Buddhist people of Myanmar, such framing may result in negative communal relations in Malaysia. On the whole, the non-Muslim community in Malaysia remains quiet about the presence of Rohingyas here. Although they did not protest against it, there is a latent unease at the overuse of religion as the reason for their acceptance in this country. Political manipulation of the issue by some Muslim groups and individuals for self-interests is not well viewed by most, both Muslims and non-Muslims.

¹⁴ Malaysia has been rated not too favourably by US with regards to human trafficking, in 2009 report, Malaysia was at tier 3, same level as Myanmar. In 2010, it has improved and was given tier2, on watch list.

CONCLUSION

Issues and problems related to refugees and migrants in Malaysia are not new. Since the 1980s, the country has been scrutinised negatively for their large presence. While Malaysia is not involved as a signatory to the Refugee Convention and Protocol, it has provided humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees and has spoken out in international forum on the issue.

The military crackdown on Rohingyas in Myanmar especially that of 2016, has heightened Malaysia's and international attention to the plight of the Rohingyas. For Malaysia, the Rohingya refugee issue requires careful attention due to the politico-religious character of the conflict, which will inevitably have important national security implications for the country. While there is yet evidence of a direct threat to social stability and national security, the potential cannot be discounted.

Social media has exposed the growing restlessness and impatience of many Rohingya groups at what they perceived as slow efforts by the government, local population and the international community to solve their problem. Their frustrations, anger and the feeling of injustice committed upon them provide a fertile ground for radicalisation.

Unless this issue is tackled in an appropriate manner, there is potential for Malaysia to emerge as the hub of militant activities of frustrated groups. The freedom of activity that they find here provides them an opportunity to organise and quantify these frustrations into a more organised resistance movement such as those that emerged in Myanmar. If it happens, the peace, security and societal harmony, found in this country maybe in jeopardy.

There is an urgent need of policies to manage the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia based on the country's own needs and national security priorities, not solely on the basis of religious solidarity. It must be remembered that the Rohingya issue is first and foremost an issue of upholding humanitarian values and an expression against human rights abuses and injustices committed upon them. Accolades and sentiments alone cannot resolve the Rohingya problem. Resolving the issue requires rational policies and effective diplomacy.

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