

The Rohingya in Malaysia: Coronavirus and Alibis for Paranoia

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Rounding up undocumented workers, migrant and refugees is part of a brutal order of things in Malaysia. When matters economic are going well, authorities turn the blindest of eyes. The money pours in; development goals are being met. During times of crisis, the eye sharpens in the search for scapegoats. With the enervating effects of the COVID-19 response, the vulnerable are easy fare.

Malaysia has deemed it unnecessary to ratify the Refugee Convention of 1951 and its relevant 1967 protocol, a situation that has given officials a misplaced sense of confidence. The writ of the universal right to asylum, they claim, does not run through the country. But for a time, an exception of sorts was made towards Rohingya refugees under the umbrella of Islamic solidarity. Malaysia's previous Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, [had called](#) their treatment at the hands of Myanmar's military as genocidal, a form of "institutionalised terrorism" involving mass killing, rape "and other gross violations of human rights (that) resulted in Rohingya feeling the country en masse."

The milk of human kindness, however, is curdling. Last Friday, 586 undocumented migrants were arrested in Kuala Lumpur. Among them were members of the Rohingya community, who have become conspicuous in number. They were taken, under police guard, to detention facilities. While this seemed like dramatic, populist theatre, [the official explanation](#) given by police chief Abdul Hamid Bador was that the arrests were made to prevent the transmission of COVID-19.

"We cannot allow them to move freely ... as it will be difficult for us to track them down if they leave identified locations."

The irony of these moves [was not missed](#) on Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch. Such detentions were bound to worsen outbreaks in the camps while also dissuading undocumented individuals from assisting authorities. In the words of a [UN statement](#),

"The fear of arrest and detention may push these vulnerable population groups further into hiding and prevent them from seeking treatment, with negative consequences for their own health and creating further risks to the spreading of COVID-19 to others."

The Home Minister Hamzah Zainudin has been off-handed in his remarks on the Rohingya refugees, whom he considers, at best, to be a nuisance tolerated by Malaysian hospitality. He has taken particular umbrage at any society or body claiming to represent their welfare,

including the Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organisation Malaysia (MEHROM). His [response](#) has been to consult the rule book with the keenness of a black letter administrator.

“The Home Ministry has made checks with the [Registrar of Societies] and found no organisations under the name ‘Rohingya’ are registered in Malaysia.”

It followed that any such organisation claiming to “represent the Rohingya ethnic group is illegal under the [Societies Act 1966].”

Having dismissed their defenders as illegal and unworthy, Hamzah’s conclusion was stark: any Rohingya national holding a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees card “have no status, rights or basis to make any claims on the government.” Such a card was paperwork without merit.

Flavouring the press conference with a touch of menace, Hamzah also noted that the Movement Control Order (MCO) phase had seen 19 reports submitted to the Royal Malaysia Police against members of the Rohingya community. Four investigations had also been opened.

The Rohingya situation is particularly perilous, having been exacerbated by the MCO imposed in targeting the spread of COVID-19. This has effectively prevented the earning of meagre wages and any form of income support. The President of MEHROM Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani has valiantly sought to [publicise](#) their plight, but such efforts have failed to inspire. Suspicions are rife that citizenship is being demanded, along with privileges even as they pose an epidemiological risk.

The pandemic has done its bit to [encourage paranoia](#) against low-income workers and Chinese tourists, and it is something the fragile political leadership in the country is pressing. But the Rohingya are now looming as prominent targets. Malaysians hear, as Tengku Emma Zuriana Tengku Azmi of the European Rohingya Council describes it, of boats filled with Rohingya refugees seeking to land potentially “steal their resources.”

Malaysian naval vessels have been tasked with preventing such boats from docking even after entering territorial waters. The universal right to seek asylum is been ignored with a degree of bog standard contempt, as is the right against non-refoulement. But the official line given is one of self-preservation and territorial integrity, despite Malaysia’s borders being, for the most part, strikingly pervious to undocumented arrivals. But officials are resolute in rhetoric: to permit such “undocumented migrants” to enter by either land or sea would risk bringing in COVID-19. To soften the blow, however, the Home Ministry [has advertised](#) their humanitarian credentials by supplying such vessels with food supplies before escorting them out of Malaysian waters.

Phelim Kine of Physicians for Human Rights [remains unconvinced](#) by the arguments favouring the taking of vessels back out to sea. “Malaysian authorities could and should have tested the Rohingya refugees for coronavirus and then appropriately isolated or quarantined them to prevent a possible transmission of the virus.”

This unsavoury picture has been helped by Malaysia’s own uneven response to the coronavirus and internal political instability. But when in doubt, point the finger elsewhere,

and that elsewhere has presented itself, as in other countries, an alibi of distraction and persecution. The plague, as Albert Camus portrayed so convincingly in his novel by that name, stirs in all of us.

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