

**Do we deserve the gov't that we have?**

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The announcement by Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi that Malaysia would be providing Rohingyas in the country with training in semi-skilled areas should be welcomed by all. In fact, it is long overdue.

As of now, UNHCR Malaysia has registered more than 150,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, the majority of whom are from Myanmar. Since Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention, these people are not permitted to work legally.

Although most are able to find employment in the informal sector, and the Malaysian authorities are generally tolerant of their presence, it is not without risk and danger, especially abuse, exploitation, as well as arbitrary arrest and detention.

Contrary to popular perception, refugees and asylum-seekers are in fact more likely to be victims of crime rather than perpetrators. The absence of state protection and legal status in Malaysia means that crimes against them are largely unreported.

While all ethnic minorities in Myanmar have been subjected to discrimination and oppression, the severest persecution befell the Rohingyas. Unlike the Chins, Karens, Kachins, Rakhines, etc., whose right to Myanmar citizenship is enshrined in the 1982 Nationality Law, the Rohingyas enjoy no such privilege.

Over the years, various 'legal' documents were issued to Myanmar residents of Rohingya origin, only to be revoked or annulled later at the whims and fancies of the military junta.

I still remember I once met a Rohingya refugee, whose impeccable English could put many Malaysians to shame. He told me he was given 'a form of citizenship' in the late 1960s, which made it possible for him to study law at the then prestigious Rangoon University (now renamed the University of Yangon).

He went on to practise law and had all the potential to be a high-flying lawyer, until the military regime enacted the 1982 Nationality Law under which the Rohingyas were not recognised as one of the 'national races'.

From a promising young lawyer, this man became stateless overnight; so did the other 800,000 or so Rohingyas in Myanmar. He was disqualified as a lawyer and had to resort to teaching English as a private tutor.

Still, the stigmatisation of the entire Rohingya community through state propaganda made life extremely intolerable for him, as fewer and fewer Myanmar parents were willing to send their young ones to be taught by him, he had no option but to leave the country for Malaysia in the 1990s.

By the time we met, he had been working as a street sweeper and car-wash worker in Kuala Lumpur for over 15 years. His Malay language was so fluent that he was often mistaken for a local, which explains why he was able to avoid arrest by the police.

Granted, other ethnic groups in Myanmar, too, have faced tremendous plights, but they are at least recognised as rightful citizens of Myanmar, while the Rohingya are not.

They encounter severe discrimination and hindrance in terms of employment, education and medical care, and their fate has been made worse over the past few years because the Myanmar military has been exerting greater control in the ethnic minority areas, especially states such as Rakhine, Shan, Karen and Kachin. More than 100,000 Rohingyas are now languishing in squalid internally displaced persons' camps in northern Rakhine state.

### **Suu Kyi's hands are tied**

If anything, the so-called democratic transition since late 2010 has brought about a very slow and minuscule change as far as the ethnic minorities are concerned, simply because Aung San Suu Kyi's hands are tied and, with the generals firmly in charge from behind the scenes, she has no say over issues related to defence and national security.

As expected, the initiatives by the Malaysian government to reach out to the Rohingya have not gone down well with the Malaysian public, the non-Muslim communities in particular. Any news about the persecution of Rohingya is invariably met with voluminous nasty, racist and xenophobic comments by Malaysian readers, and I would not be surprised if this article encounters the same.

Malaysians have every right to condemn the hypocrisy on the part of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and his government.

Truth be told, I hold to some degree the majority Muslim community in Malaysia responsible for the apathy and even cynicism of the non-Muslims towards the Rohingya issue, because it was the failure of the large segment of Malaysian Muslim society in speaking up for the non-Muslims when they came under the attack of the Muslim fanatics that gave rise to the pervasive indifference today.

And the double standards of the Muslim NGOs are aplenty, too. For instance, while they cry out loud over the lack of international action in response to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the equally brutal, if not more, killing of the West Papuans by the Indonesian army has mostly gone unnoticed. This is a topic that I already dealt with more than two years ago.

Be that as it may, there is no denying that the Rohingyas are in dire need of foreign assistance. Day in day out, they are subjected to waves of attacks by Myanmar soldiers and Buddhist extremists, with no hope in sight. I know full well Najib has lost his moral high ground ever since the 1MDB scandal was exposed, and he is merely using the Rohingya issue for political mileage.

Still, I will not stop him from doing some 'good' for the Rohingyas, because to do so is to punish the victims of human failure. The correct response is to put more pressure on the

Malaysian government to do more for other communities in need, such as the Orang Asli and Malaysians living in poverty.

Last but not least, non-Malay Malaysians must stop equalling their fate to that of a refugee. There is no doubt that the country is becoming increasingly intolerant of its ethnic and religious minorities, but to use the racism enshrined in the Federal Constitution to argue that non-Malays are on the verge of ethnic-cleansing is an accusation too far.

Unlike the Rohingyas, non-Malay Malaysians in general continue to be able to earn a decent living, do business, access higher education despite the discriminatory recruitment policy, and even own land and real estate, all of which are beyond the dreams of many refugees around the world.

Non-Malay Malaysians are also entitled to Malaysian citizenship, which is not the case of the Rohingyas. The last time I checked, the Malaysian passport is actually ranked the fifth most powerful in the world. I am suggesting we should be thankful to the opportunistic Najib government; millions of hard-working Malaysians too have contributed to this diplomatic success. Just that we must also count our blessings, not only the curses.

As citizens of Malaysia, we have every right to chastise the government for not doing enough for the country and the people, but as fellow human beings, we must also learn to be able to hold the government to account without dehumanising the weaker minorities. Otherwise, we simply deserve the government that we have.

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