

The polemics of the Rohingya issue- Do We Help them as Refugees or as mere Economic Migrants?

Rohingya have made Malaysia their favoured destinations since the 1960s. Their 'persecution' at the hands of the Burmese military junta saw many coming over in larger numbers in the 1980s and the early 1990s. It must be stressed that as *asylum seekers*, their numbers have never reached the proportions of the Vietnamese boat people in the 1970s. They seem content to flee from Myanmar, into Thailand and Malaysia as individuals or in small groups. What do we know about Rohingyas? The Rohingyas claimed they were a sovereign people living in the western and northwestern Myanmar since the 17th century. Others dismiss these claims saying they are descendents of Indian, Parsee and Arab traders who married local women in Arakan state, where the majority of the today's Rohingyas live. Arakanese or Rakhines, used to denote both Buddhists and Muslims who live in Arakan. Now, 'Rakhine' mean the Buddhists living in Arakan. To foster their own distinct identity, the Muslims in Arakan took to calling themselves as Rohingyas in the early part of the 20th century. This came into the current nomenclature as Rohingyas used this term extensively to even differentiate themselves from the other Muslim Myanmar groups, especially the Tamil Muslims, the Burmese Muslims, and the Malays living in the south of the country. Rohingyas also stood accused by some from the Bama majority of being pro-British during their independence struggle. This created an atmosphere of suspicion and animosity towards Rohingyas among the Bama majority who on the eve of independence and even today, feel threatened by the Muslim Rohingyas in the west and northwest, and the Christian Karen/ Karenni tribes in the east and northeast bordering Thailand. The Bama animosity is seen at its worst when the ruling military junta in Myanmar

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'Rohingya' from the list of recognized ethnic minority in Myanmar through the Burma Citizenship Law of 1982. The result was the total rendering of an entire race or ethnicity as 'stateless'. In one stroke, almost all Rohingyas lost their rights and privileges as citizens and become stateless peoples within the borders of their own country! Malaysia does not keep a detailed list of Rohingya asylum seekers. No official statistics exist that actually tabulate their dispersal in Malaysia, nor as to what status they actually possess when they entered Malaysia, and whether they have the necessary legal documentation from the Malaysian authorities and UNHCR that will regulate their stay and status while in Malaysia. They numbered between 7000 and 10000. However, the lack of comprehensive Malaysian studies of their familial migration pattern makes this intriguing. The Malaysian Human Rights Commission has been informed that Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia has early records of interviews done with these asylum seekers, which point to the disturbing fact that many latter Rohingya arrivals in Malaysia are economic migrants, unlike the earlier ones fleeing religious cum racial persecution at the hands of the military junta.

Questions surrounding Rohingyas in Malaysia are:

1. Are the Rohingyas coming in as nuclear or extended families?
2. Who arranged for them to enter and stay in Malaysia?
3. And, are they really Rohingyas from Arakan State? Or from other states or countries?
4. Are they Bangladesh nationals masquerading as Rohingyas as often claimed by the Myanmar military junta?
5. Can they prove they are bona fide asylum seekers from Myanmar repression? Is the UNHCR able to segregate them from the economic migrants?
6. And most pertinently, and worrying to say the least, **are** the Rohingyas hoping to stay on in Malaysia as fully recognized refugees able to live and work in Malaysia; and return to Myanmar when the political climate changes, or
7. Are they still hoping to be sent to third countries?

These are the questions that I am raising in this abstract. As a Malaysian scholar and former officer in the Malaysian Human Rights Commission, I hope to do a more in-depth study into this subject, as it may impact on how Malaysia regards asylum seekers in the near future.