Malaysia's Aging Population: Does It Warrant a Rohingya Solution?

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Abstract

This article explores the incoming aging population crisis in Malaysia and how the government could possibly remedy this issue with the help of Rohingya refugees already in Malaysia.

Introduction

Rohingya refugees have been seeking refuge and asylum in Malaysia for decades.[1] However, the mass influx of them swarming into local neighbourhoods has brought concern and growing calls for deportation.[2] The Rohingya issue is nothing new, they have been here since the 90s and while Malaysia has traditionally been very friendly to Muslim refugees and asylum seekers; sentiments amongst the locals are changing. The spike in theft and break-in cases committed by Rohingyas has caused social unease and anxiety amongst the local populace with one of the most notable cases being the "Jahan Gang" case, where the police launch an investigation and hunt for a Rohingya woman believed to have masterminded the "Jahan Gang" which was linked to a series of robberies and burglaries in and around the Klang Valley.

In this article, we will focus on how the Rohingya crisis could potentially be turned into an opportunity for Malaysia to tackle the long-term population problem in the country. The Rohingya community are historically an indigenous tribe in Western Myanmar[3], but after decades of political persecution and conflict within Myanmar's society, they are being

[1] (Muzafarkamal, N.S. and Hossain, I. (2019) 'Malaysia's policy towards the Rohingya refugees (Polisi Malaysia terhadap Pelarian Rohingya)', *Journal of Islam in Asia (E-ISSN 2289-8077)*, 16(3), pp. 436–453. doi:10.31436/jia.v16i3.848.

[2] Head, J. (2022) *Why is Malaysia deporting myanmar asylum seekers?*, *BBC News*. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63370101 (Accessed: 08 November 2023).

[3] Busyairi, M. and Bui, T.K. (2021) 'Rohingya, a struggle for recognition as "indigenous"', *Jurnal Ilmiah Kajian Keimigrasian*, 4(1), pp. 117–124. doi:10.52617/jikk.v4i1.169.

categorised as a stateless tribe. Based on a BBC report by Mark Dummett in 2010, they are often described as *"the world's least wanted and most persecuted people".*[4]

Uprooted: The World's Least Wanted and Most Persecuted People (Bloodxile)

Malaysia has been a safe refuge for the Rohingya tribe for decades with the first wave arriving on Malaysian shores in the aftermath of *Operation King Dragon* being carried out by the Burmese Junta, which was aimed at systematically categorising and labelling the Rohingya tribe as foreign with the view of eventually expelling them from the country.

Malaysia, while not a signatory to the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and its protocol have always been rather friendly to Muslim asylum seekers and some of them were even given citizenship and identification cards after residing in Malaysia for several years. A few examples of this, are the Suluk tribe from the Philippines, Malays from the Pattani region and Syrian refugees.[5]

However, the granting of citizenship to foreign nationals has always been a subject of controversy amongst Malaysians particularly the Malay Bumiputera groups due to the history of societal and cultural differences as well as what they perceive as a lack of effort from them to assimilate and adapt to their local norms and culture. In Malaysia, there is preferential treatment being given by the government towards the Bumiputera community in terms of government aid, assistance, etc under *Article 153 of the Federal Constitution*. The Bumiputera make up about 70.1 percent of the total population in Malaysia with a large proportion of them being Malays, who are the dominant ethnic group in West Malaysia.[6]

Dilemma: The Malay Identity?

Over the years, questions have been asked of how the government categorises someone as a Malay which by extension would grant them the status of Bumiputera and the preferential treatment that one would get as guaranteed under *Article 153 of the Federal Constitution*. Under *Article 160 of the Federal Constitution*, a Malay is being defined as *"a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom"*. In fact, under a census recorded from 1911-1947, the British government had split the Malays into

[4] Dummett, M. (2010a) *Bangladesh accused of 'crackdown' on rohingya refugees*, *BBC News*. Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8521280.stm (Accessed: 08 November 2023).

[5] (Ismail, Y. (2018) *UNHCR welcomes move by Malaysia to grant citizenship to stateless persons*, *UNHCR Malaysia*. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/my/news/news-releases/unhcr-welcomes-move-malaysia-grant-citizenship-stateless-persons (Accessed: 08 November 2023).

[6] (*Published by Statista Research Department and 13, S. (2023) Malaysia: Population by ethnicity 2023, Statista. Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1017372/malaysia-breakdown-of-population-by-ethnicity/ (Accessed: 08 November 2023).*

two separate categories which consisted of native Malays and foreign Malays which was highlighted in a journal article by Tengku Shamsul Bahrin.[7] The distinction between the two lies in the fact that native Malays have ancestral roots to the land and nation while foreign Malays are later migrants who arrived from neighbouring states such as Indonesia, Thailand, Riau Island and even Brunei.[8]

At the time of independence, to simplify matters almost all Muslim residents in the country (unless due to special requests and circumstances) were categorised into one racial/ethnic identity which is Malay Muslim. Over the presiding decades of intermarriage and cultural assimilation, the modern Malay Muslim identity was formed. That is considered a successful example of a social engineering process. However, other examples are less successful.

For instance, the Suluk people originate from the Philippines. While historically, Suluk people are recognised in Sabah as one of the state's recognised ethnic groups.[9] The major spike in numbers in the Suluk population in addition to several uncovered incidents (Project IC) has angered the Bumiputera in Sabah, pointing to the fact that the exponential spike in numbers of that community to be yet another demographic engineering attempt from some beneficiaries which was explored in an article by Kamal Sadiq of the University of California-Irvine,[10] and several other books, reports and testimonies with the most notable one being the *Royal Commission of Inquiry on Illegal Immigrants in Sabah* conducted at the request of the Federal Government. The most famous cases of this is Project IC which was a systematic naturalisation attempt to alter the demographics of Sabah to make it more favourable for certain political parties on the electoral roll. Until today, the sentiments of native Bumiputera towards the Suluk community remain that of anger and it was not helped by the fact that the Suluk people have very different cultures and language from the natives.

Hostilities Explained

All these incidents as mentioned above have over time led to the societal attitudes that Malaysians in general have towards granting refugees asylum in our country, let alone

[7] *Bahrin, T.S. (1966) The growth and distribution of the Indonesian population in Malaya.*
[8] Tan, L.-H. (1982) *The state and economic distribution in Peninsular Malaysia toward an alternative theoret. approach*. Singapore, Singapore: Inst. of Southeast Asian Studies.
[9] Merican, A.M. (2022) *The Suluk are natives of sabah, but their narrative is absent*, *The Suluk are natives of Sabah, but their narrative is absent*. Available at: https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2022/08/823904/suluk-are-natives-sabah-their-narrative-absent (Accessed: 08 November 2023).
[10] *"Sadiq, K. (2017) 'When states prefer non-citizens over citizens: Conflict over illegal immigration into Malaysia', Immigration, pp. 219–240. doi:10.4324/9781315252599-7.*

discussing the possibility of granting them permanent refuge and citizenship. Malaysia in general possesses a very multi-racial, multi-religious society which is generally prone to differences in opinions on many national issues, but one of the few national issues where all the ethnic groups hold a consensus is that hard stance on granting citizenship due to their experience in dealing with migrants.

Presently there are roughly 200,000 documented Myanmar refugees (most of them being Rohingyas) in Malaysia according to official data which was later clarified in Parliament by Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim that the number as of March 2023 have surpassed 200,000 Myanmar refugees. The sheer number of them, in addition to cultural and linguistic differences between Malaysian citizens and the Rohingya, has cast an anxious mood in Malaysian society. In post-independence Malaysia history, mass migration and subsequent legitimate naturalisation of citizens have only happened twice. In 1957, at the time of independence of the Federation of Malaya. The newly born nation gave citizenships to millions of foreign imported labourers consisting of a majority of Chinese and Indians and again in 1963, when the merger exercise of admitting the Borneo territories of Sabah and Sarawak, meant millions of Sabahans and Sarawakians became citizens of the new Federation of Malaysia overnight.

In truth, even after 60-odd years of independence, co-habitation, and co-existence. Ethnic relations between the different races still become heated and tense from time to time. Thus, the idea of social integration and naturalisation of Rohingya into Malaysian society remains something that is deemed radical and totally unacceptable. It is not beyond imagination that the non-Muslim's negative sentiments will be heightened, as any attempt at naturalising any more Muslim refugees would be equivalent to rubbing salt on the wounds of a wounded tiger as they would deem it as yet another demographic exercise to marginalise them. In 1957, the racial composition and ratio of the Federation of Malaya was 59(Muslim):41(non-Muslim).[11] After the merger of territories between the Federation, Singapore, North Borneo (Modern-day Sabah) and Sarawak; the ratio became 54 (Muslim): 46 (non-Muslim).[12] After the expulsion of Singapore in 1965 and subsequent demographic engineering exercises, government policies and several other factors; the current racial composition in Malaysia stands at 64 (Muslim): 36 (non-Muslim).[13]

[11] *Malaya's early 20th century population change - articles* (no date) *Economic History Malaya*. Available at: https://www.ehm.my/publications/articles/malayas-early-20th-century-population-change (Accessed: 08 November 2023).
[12] (n 11).
[13] (n 11).

Nonetheless, the fact is that the Rohingyas are presently still residing and taking asylum in this country with no solution in sight as to what is to be done with them. They have been denied a return to Myanmar by its government, and the official stance of the Burmese officials is that they will not be granted citizenship even if they are to return to Myanmar, not to mention the persecution, genocide and ethnic cleansing attempts.[14] As Malaysia is not a signatory to either the UN's *1951 Refugee Convention* or the *1967 Protocol*, the country has no legal obligation to keep them here. While there are United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees offices in Malaysia keeping track of them, presently Malaysia does not get any financial assistance in the operation of keeping and managing them.

Thus, it is valid and understandable on Malaysia's part as to why they want the Rohingyas gone since the country is not legally obligated to keep them here and more importantly, the society does not see the value of keeping them here. This is where we take a deeper dive into Malaysia's long-term societal population problems and how this may be the value add-in which Malaysian society may be willing to consider accepting them into its unique social fabric.

Troubles at the Baby Factory

Lower birth rates and an ageing population is not a foreign subject to most developed and developing countries. Based on current data, the Statistics Department has predicted that the country may become an ageing nation by 2030, with people aged 60 years and over surpassing 15 percent of the working population. While birth rates recorded in 2022, shows that the total fertility rate for the year 2022 has reached the lowest in 50 years, standing at 1.6 children per woman aged 15 to 49 compared to 1.7 children recorded in 2021. However, Malaysia will inevitably have to encounter such a challenge since it is merely following the trends in most developing countries. Even neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines which traditionally have a much larger population and are less economically developed than Malaysia have experienced a slow-down in population growth in the past decade.[15]

While we accept that it is an inevitable trend, steps and plans still need to be set out to ensure Malaysia does not in the near future, suffer from the *"Japanese Demographic Syndrome"*. Japan is the best example in terms of the administration not being realistic and

[14] (n 11).
[15] Pfordten, D. (2023) *My.Malaysia: The country's population is growing at a faster rate, here's why*, *The Star*. Available at: https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/09/07/mymalaysia-the-country039s-population-is-growing-at-a-faster-rate-here039s-why (Accessed: 08 November 2023).

cutthroat enough to undertake the tough decisions needed to counter the ageing crisis. Compared to Japan, developed countries have successfully mitigated the population crisis through well-planned immigration and social policies with the more successful examples of these being found in Canada, Sweden, and Singapore.[16] While there have also been interesting experiments from other countries like Spain, China, and Norway.[17]

One constant between all these countries is that these countries acknowledged early enough that well-structured and well-planned immigration policies, coupled with comprehensive social integration policies are instrumental in future-proofing the societal structure and ensuring the survival of the nation and its people. In the Rohingyas lies an opportunity for Malaysia to begin this future-proofing process. Whilst it is undeniable as aforementioned, that major differences do exist between this stateless tribe and the overall 32 million strong Malaysian citizens. However, there lies a potential reality where both sides can get what they want. One in which the Rohingyas finally have a place to call home, while Malaysia begins its first proactive steps in countering the inevitable population problem.

A Rohingya Master Plan?

Compared to other countries that completely liberalise their immigration policies and allow foreign nationals from all over the world to come in as citizens, it would be pertinent for Malaysia to consider starting by nationalising and legitimising those who are already here. Not only does this make sense from a population-planning policy perspective, but it also actually makes a lot of sense economically. It is well-documented that Malaysia suffers from a severe shortage of 3D (Dirty, Dangerous and Difficult) workers. For decades, Malaysia has had to import foreign labourers to work these blue-collar 3D jobs.

The import or hiring of foreign labourers comes with all kinds of problems be it leaving halfway in the middle of employment, crimes/thefts committed, language barriers and the documentation process is very susceptible to corruption. While this article is not suggesting that nationalising the Rohingyas will be less problematic than hiring foreign labourers, comparatively it does provide more long-term benefits. An exercise like this will no doubt also strengthen Malaysia's position on the global human rights scene which will in turn cement the nation’s position as a soft power in an increasingly polarised and divided global order.

[16] Rogerson, A. and Stacey, S. (2018) ‘Successful ageing in Singapore’, *Geriatrics*, 3(4), p. 81. doi:10.3390/geriatrics3040081.
[17] (n 15).

The nationalisation process for the Rohingyas is easier said than done, but the process must first start with proper identification and registration. On this front the Home Ministry could work with the UNHCR offices in Malaysia. To accurately calculate the total number of Rohingyas in this country as well as their geographic location around the country. Once the authorities have got the precise figures of them and their whereabouts, they can then prepare the next step beginning with proper health screening with the cooperation of the Ministry of Health (MOH), the national health body to ensure these refugees are not carrying any foreign illness that may threaten the safety of the locals which would only exacerbate the discrimination towards them.

After registration and health-screening, the Rohingyas would have to be introduced to some courses for them to integrate into local society such as learning the Malay language, important local laws, etc. After all these courses, they would have to first be split into 3 categories. Elder (those above 55-year-olds), Adult (18–54-year-olds) and Children (below 18 years old). The 3 groups would be given different documentation from the government for distinct purposes. The children group would be able to attend schools, while the adults will essentially be holding a form of a working visa and the elders subject to circumstances will be allowed to work and will be able to access eldercare facilities and support.

The government should also while trying to keep families together distribute them to different states according to several criteria such as labour requirements in those areas, under populated district schools and declining population in rural towns. The systematic approach of distribution of the community will prevent the locals from being blindsided by a sudden flooding of Rohingyas into their neighbourhoods which would stunt their integration into society. For the working adults, there will also be a need for skills development and technical training to ensure that they are equipped with the relevant skillset to get themselves employed and financially sustain themselves in the long-term and hopefully one day be able to provide tax contribution.

These documented 3 groups will be eligible to automatically apply for citizenship upon certain criteria being met. For instance, children will be automatically eligible to gain citizenship upon finishing 11 years of formal education. Adults will be eligible to gain citizenship upon working for 15 years in the country and having reference letters from their employers. While for the Elders, their citizenship will granted automatically once they have resided in the country for 10 years and their children have worked in the country for the same amount of time. It must be noted that these ideas are very much in its infancy and only serves

as suggestions, it is imperative that the relevant government authorities come up with suitable and practical policy frameworks and directives which would best serve the goals of this article.

Based on the current data recorded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Refugee Agency; as of 31st of August 2023, the average family size of a Rohingya refugee stands at roughly 4.7 people and that some 66% of refugees and asylum-seekers are man while 34% of them are women. It is also recorded that 50,170 of them are children. Furthermore, Rohingyas are still more or less a rural farming tribe that still records a very high birth rate.[18] This was seen in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh where the Bangladeshi Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said the birth rate was alarmingly high in the past five years in the Rohingya's refugee camps, with about 35,000 newborns reported every year, averaging more than 95 babies a day.[19] This will in essence be a viable solution to counter the aging population problem that Malaysia is projected to face by the end of the decade.

Conclusion

While Malaysia as a country is relatively young, it has demonstrated throughout its history that it is a country that is highly pragmatic in its approach to safeguarding its national interests and its people's welfare, doing what's best and necessary for the country time and time again. After all, it is one of the few countries that managed to gain independence without a war, one that embraced democracy and a free market well ahead of most of its neighbours, one which underwent industrialisation while others are still pondering on it, one which has managed to stroll through the tumultuous Cold War era unscathed as well as being one of a handful of nations which are considered allies by the Islamic world, the West, and China, at a time in which tensions are boiling. It is high time that Malaysia takes its population crisis seriously wherein the Rohingyas could very well be the ideal solution.

[18] Waters, T. (2023) *Guest column: The quiet rohingya population explosion in Cox's bazaar*, *The Irrawaddy*. Available at: https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/asia/the-quiet-rohingya-population-explosion-in-coxs-bazaar.html (Accessed: 08 November 2023).

[19] Editor, O.N. (2022) *95 newborns each day: Rohingya Baby Boom worries Bangladesh*, *La Prensa Latina Media*. Available at: https://www.laprensalatina.com/95-newborns-each-day-rohingya-baby-boom-worries-bangladesh/#:~:text=%2D%20Some%2095%20new%20babies%20are,%2C%20mainly%20Muslims%2C%20from%20Myanmar. (Accessed: 08 November 2023).

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