Lesson Learned of Rohingya Persecution in Myanmar for Sustainable Development and Policy Transformation in Malaysia

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ABSTRAK


This paper examines about the lesson learned of persecuted Rohingya people in Myanmar. The Myanmar regime does not recognize the Rohingyas as their people and accused them as Bengalis from Bangladesh. The issue of denied citizenship has caused the Rohingya people to live in limbo. Unlike other ethnicities in Myanmar, they are denied the rights as sovereign citizens. The situation becomes worse when the other local citizens, for the reason of ethnic and religion matters, join forces with the regime in violating and abusing the Rohingyas. Therefore, the Rohingyas are left as stateless people in their own country and are forced to become refugees to seek a better life. The case of the Rohingya people in Myanmar can be a lesson learned for Malaysians who are living in a multi-society country. The government and the people have to be aware that unfair policy and physical violence could increase the intensity of conflict and cause bad implication in terms of peace and harmony in the country. Hence, several possible peace process initiatives of sustainable development must be introduced to transform the certain policy and further strengthen the ethnic relation in Malaysia to ensure everyone lives together in peace and harmony.
INTRODUCTION

According to the data reported by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 149,500 registered refugees and asylum-seekers in Malaysia as of February 2017 (UNHCR Malaysia 2017). From the statistic, many of the refugees are found to be from various ethnicities of Myanmar. Majority of them are the Rohingyas with a staggering number of 56,458, followed by the Chins (39,684), the Myanmar Muslims (10,454) and the Rakhines (4,611). There are also refugees from outside of Southeast Asia region like the Pakistanis (3,058), the Sri Lankans (2,626), the Yemenis (2,008), the Syrians (1,878), the Somalis (1,858), the Iraqis (1,456), the Afghans (844) and the Palestinians (687).

UNHCR is one the United Nations agency to provide humanitarian assistance for people who have fled or forced to leave their country of origin due to human rights abuse and internal conflicts (UNHCR 2003). To recognize the people who deserve to be assisted, UNHCR through the Article 1 of the 1951 Refugees Convention and 1967 Protocol provides some definition of refugees as follows:

“A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (UNHCR 2009).

The definition above helps UNHCR to determine the individuals who can be considered as eligible refugees; those whose hardship is caused by persecuted reasons rather than those of economic crisis. Currently, the Rohingyas are the largest refugees in Malaysia, as recorded by UNHCR. They become refugees due to the government policy that does not recognize them as people of Myanmar. They are accused as Bengalis from Bangladesh because of their skin colour and their religion as Muslim. The oppression towards the Rohingyas has prevented them from enjoying the basic rights of a citizen. In Myanmar, the local Buddhists are found supporting the government policy and agree that the Rohingyas should leave the country. The situation has left the Rohingyas in limbo and insecure, resulting them to leave Myanmar in order to seek for a better life.

METHODS

This research looks at the Myanmar regime not recognizing the existence of the Rohingya people as citizens, because they are considered to be Bengali originating from Bangladesh. The methods used are case studies, literature studies, and secondary data processing from various social elements. In addition, data collection was carried out by means of interviewing the sources. This article is written to provide an overview of the government and the people of Myanmar should be aware that unfair policies and physical violence can increase the intensity of conflict and have negative implications in terms of peace and harmony in the country. This article presents preliminary findings that present data from various related sources, regarding ethnic relations in Malaysia to ensure all people live together in peace and harmony.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Obviously, the persecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar shows there is an unequal treatment from the government and local people towards the minority group. They are two major issues influencing the ethnic relation in Myanmar to become violence and unfair; religion and identity. The implication of the persecution and ethnic conflict in Myanmar has made the Rohingyas as stateless people and turned them into refugees. In addition, it also portrays negative image for Myanmar as multi-society country. Hence, it is an exemplary case that can be learned for Malaysia as multi-society country to maintain peace and stability in terms of ethnic relation.

Ethnic Relation in Malaysia

Ethnic relations continue to be a debatable issue and Malaysia is not exempted from this prevalent conflict. As a multi-racial country, Malaysia comprises people from diverse background of religions, customs, cultures, and languages (Richard 2007). The formation of Malaysia as a multi-ethnic society did not commence from its independence on 31 August 1957, but the process started during the era of the Malacca Sultanate in the fourteenth century (Syed Husin Ali 2008). The ruler of Malacca had established this region as a strategic and important port for traders from the East and West. The port attracted heaps of people to visit Malacca for various purposes; trade's activities, diplomatic relations, education, and missionary efforts especially from the Muslim traders of Arab. These circumstances made Malacca a multi-ethnic society particularly through its social activities such as mixed marriage between the locals and foreigners as well as the migration process. The ethnic relations in Malaya (old name of Malaysia) became more complex during the colonization of foreign powers, especially British.

The process of enhancing the ethnic relation in Malaysia is not easy due to the previous colonial era of British. In order to retain the power of its colony, British was implemented a policy, which known as Divide and Rule Policy to separate the Malay (old name of Malaysia) people in terms of settlement and economy sectors. For example, the Malays were to settle in villages (kampung) and conduct small scale agriculture activities, the Chinese were to settle in small towns and practice business and mining activities while the Indians lived in estates and work in commercial plantation sector. The segregation between the Malays, Chinese and Indian in Malaya was an strategic advantage for the British in order to avoid the local people and foreign laborers to stand together and unite. At that time, the process of establishing unity could not be initiated due to limited amount of interaction among them even though they lived in the same area or village (Kheng 2002). Without sufficient interaction between the different races living in Malaya, it has proven to be difficult to build trust and unity because they failed to understand the differences between them and the
negative perceptions they have towards each other could not be dispelled.

The harboring of negative perceptions towards other races brings with it the possibility of creating a conflict, in line with the words contained in the Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO (2010) declaring that “wars begin in the minds of men or women”. This problem is also relevant to the ethnic relations in Malaya, which deteriorated after Malaya’s independence.

Ethnic Conflict in Malaysia

Miall, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse (1999) defined ethnic as “a social group distinguished by race, religion, or national origin”. Winter and Leighton (2001) further expanded the definition of ethnic as “a group socially distinguished or set apart, by others or by itself, primarily on the basis of cultural or national origin characteristic”. However, Harbom and Wallenstein (2005) defined multi-ethnic society as “a result of inter-ethnic relations, whenever two different groups or societies come into contact and establish various modes of spatial, political-economic, cultural and social relations”. Therefore, based on the argument above, it can be understood that multi-ethnic society is about the daily life interaction among the different races in many aspects and it is complicated to understand because it involves the complexity of their identities.

Bates et al. (2003) defined ethnic conflict as “any episode of sustained violent conflicts in which national, ethnic, religious, or other communal minorities challenge the government to seek major changes in status”. On the other hand, Davies (1962) argued that ethnic conflicts exist when there is an intolerable gap between what people feel they deserve and what they get in terms of goods or economic power; this will then lead to a group of dissatisfied people joining together and revolting. Meanwhile, Besançon (2005) stated that political and economic inequality also lead to ethnic conflicts. Thus, ethnic conflicts can occur not only because of the differences of culture and religion among the ethnicities but also due to political instability and economic inequality.

Although Malaysia made to achieve its independence on 31st August 1957, the process of ethnic relation was still at its initial stages. It was one of the most challenging tasks for this country; to manage the peace and stability among people of different races, with different religions, cultures, languages, and customs. The climax of ethnic conflict in Malaya was the May 13 tragedy in 1969. It was a direct consequence of the British divide and rule policy which they implemented in Malaya.

The May 13 tragedy is considered to be the peak of the ethnic conflict that has taken place in the country. Prior to this tragedy, several other ethnic conflicts had taken place such as in Batu Pahat (1945), Batu Malim, Raub (1946), Batu Kikir (1946), Penang (1958), Pangkor (May 1959) and Bukit Mertajam (1967) (Mior 2014). Therefore, the government recognized that ethnic conflict was a matter of concern and had to be taken seriously because it could affect national harmony as well as political and economic stability (Zainon et. al. 2004).

Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals

Previously, the concept of sustainable development is focusing on the issues of development, economic, and environment regionally and globally (Emas 2015). However, this concept can be expanded to another area that concerns the importance of intergenerational equity. Hence the United Nations provide the comprehensive definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations General Assembly 1987). The key issue of the sustainable development is about the possibility to maintain the positive efforts and bequeathed to future generations.

In order to enhance the concept of sustainable development, in the world, the United Nations under one of its body, United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) took the initiative to introduce the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The roles of SDGs is to cover a broad range of social and economic development issues. The main agenda of SDGs is to transform the world based on sustainable development approach toward various issue such as climate change, health, gender equality, social justice, education, hunger, poverty, environment, sanitation, water, and energy (SDGs 2015). SDGs has 17 goals that need to be implement to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The number 16 goal of SDGs is to stress on the peace, justice, and strong institution.

The ethnic conflict around the world including what is happening in Myanmar has caused a destructive impact on a country's development, affecting economic growth and often resulting in long standing grievances that can last for generations (SDGs 2015). Sustainable development is key to sustaining peace and vice versa. Therefore, peace process is the important factor that can support the sustainable development initiative in country (Soliman and Taranco 2017). Moreover, the government should take the precautions effort to avoid the ethnic conflict by create some certain policy and particular agency to manage the problem smoothly (Stoddart, H. et. al. 2011). The case of persecution of Rohingya people in Myanmar also can be a lesson learned for Malaysia to find a durable solution about sustainable development in terms of peace and tranquility in the country.

Persecution in Myanmar and Lesson Learned for Sustainable Development and Policy Transformation about Peace Process in Malaysia

As a multi-society country, it is difficult for Malaysia to avoid the racial conflict from rising. The previous ethnic conflicts happening in Malaysia show the ethnic relation among the Malaysian needs to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the ethnic relation in Malaysia is still better than the ethnic’s situation in Myanmar which suppresses the minority Rohingyas Muslims. The unjust action of the Myanmar government towards the Rohingyas in creating law and constitution that does not recognize them as citizens even they have been living in the state of Rakhine
before the presence of British is an example of injustice. Majority of Buddhists in Myanmar fail to showcase respect towards other religions and culture, particularly the Rohingya Muslims. As majority in the country, they prefer Myanmar prevails solely as a Buddhist country and all people should be Buddhist and follow all its custom and tradition.

As a lesson learned from the persecution in Myanmar, both Malaysian government and its people should be aware that the ethnic conflict in the country will be an obstacle for peace, stability and economy development. Therefore, Malaysian government and its people should play their role in managing the ethnic relation and prevent the conflict from rising.

Since the May 13 tragedy, the government took sustainable development initiatives and policy transformation to manage the conflict and promote peace, such as launching the New Economic Policy (NEP), which laid down two main objectives to be achieved, namely the eradication of poverty and the restructuring of society (Abdul Rahman 2007). In addition, the Rukun Negara or National Pledge as well as a national anthem were introduced in order for all ethnic groups in Malaysia to be able to have a shared sense of identity and to have the same national philosophical principles irrespective of ethnicity (Shamsul Amri 2005). The government under Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak launched the concept of "1Malaysia" with its motto entitled "people first, performance now" is operating as a nation-state to consolidate relations between the races in Malaysia to any ethnic strife could be avoided and can live in peace, and the people with the government can work together to develop the country (Aizat Khairi 2011).

To ensure better transformation implementation of policies, the Malaysian government has established agencies in various departments within particular ministries. Each agency has its dedicated role based on the portfolio of its department and ministry. However, the government agency that was specifically established in order to deal with ethnic relations in the country and create substantial efforts for reconciliation is the Department of National Unity and Integration (DNUI) (Kamarul, Zaharah & Abu 2005) which inherited the role of DNUI. DNUI has a unique history and is different from other government agencies. It was established in the aftermath of the May 13 tragedy when the government had begun to realize the importance of setting up a government agency that focuses on unity and integration, in view of the racial conflicts which had taken place in the country (Madiah Mohamad et al. 2008).

Nevertheless, the efforts of government alone to prevent the ethnic conflict and promoting peace will be useless if there is no support from the community in the country. Fisher et al. (2000) explained that community members can be act as conflict resolver and promote peace within the local community. The approach by fellow Malaysians can support local perspective and contribute to lasting peace. Public institutions can be strengthen through activities at community level. This role can be illustrated through the effort such as Rukun Tetangga as a community organization in Malaysia, representing the community-based peacebuilding approach.

Rukun Tetangga was established in 1975 by the government as a counter-action against the May 13 tragedy to allow and empower the people in a community to maintain the security of residential areas by themselves (Mansor Nor 2001). The cooperation and participation from the community members to protect their own neighborhood, especially in urban areas by conducting patrols not only will reduce the crime rate, but also build a closer relationship between the community members.

Although Rukun Tetangga was created by the government, this is a community organization that is fully run by the people themselves. Rukun Tetangga also play a role in resolving conflicts and problems among the community members. Groups who encounter conflict will seek assistance from the committees of Rukun Tetangga as the third party or mediator to find a solution to their problems. Rukun Tetangga wishes to serve their own community and to solve any problem that occur within the community because they understand the problems and conflicts better and should be managed according to their preferable ways. The intervention by outside parties attempting to resolve the conflict is feared to lead to greater conflict and not in accordance with the community norms.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic relation in Malaysia need to be dealt with carefully. The intensity level of a conflict can rise if an ethnic took things for granted. That is why the efforts took by government to sustain the peace in Malaysia can be seen by its policy transformation by creating several initiatives like NEP, Rukun Negara, national anthem, 1Malaysia, and DNUI. However, the role of the government as an independent party in managing the ethnic relations in Malaysia is insufficient even though there are policy and agency that focus on preventing the conflict from emerging and promoting the peace.

The role of Malaysian community should be incorporated in order to assist and support the government efforts. For example, the involvement of community members in each program created by the Rukun Tetangga is important because it is them who should determine the state of their lives, whether to create a harmonious living condition or otherwise. So, preserving the peace in Malaysia does not only involve a top-down approach by the government, but it is also requires bottom-up approach through the commitment of community organization to co-operate with government agencies.

Like Myanmar, Malaysia, who has a multi-ethnic society need to take precautions and learn from the persecution of the Rohingyas incidents in order to ensure that ethnic conflicts are not repeated in Malaysia and the stability and harmony present in this country today can be enjoyed continuously. This is a paramount step in order for us to achieve Vision 2020 for Malaysia to become a developed country by 2020.
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