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Transnational Hate Speech and Disinformation: Anti-Rohingya Sentiments in Indonesia

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SYNOPSIS

The upsurge of hatred towards Rohingya refugees in Indonesia presents a compelling case for greater regional cooperation in resolving the conflict in Myanmar and combatting transnational transmission of disinformation and hate speech.

COMMENTARY

Precarious Solidarity

After the 2012 Rohingya refugee crisis, [solidarity among Indonesians for the Rohingya surged](#) as the Rohingya were viewed as Muslim victims of an unjust conflict perpetrated by non-Muslims in Myanmar. At the time, extremist responses included calls for jihad from the Islamic Reformist Movement (Gerakan Reformis Islam, or GARIS), the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, or FPI), and the Committee for Advocacy on behalf of Arakanese Rohingya Muslims (Komite Advokasi Muslim Rohingya-Arakan, or KAMRA). Tensions escalated when a bomb exploded at the Ekayana Buddhist Vihara in Jakarta in August 2013, following a thwarted plot to bomb the Myanmar embassy earlier in May.

Indonesia witnessed a [similar fervour of support](#) for the Rohingya following the 2017 crisis, where more than 700,000 Rohingya were driven out of northern Rakhine into Bangladesh. This time, the “212 Movement” organised a series of demonstrations, including a 5,000-strong rally in front of the Myanmar embassy and the “Aksi 169” rally on 16 September 2017. The latter drew an estimated 10,000 participants, including opposition politicians such as Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN) founder Amien Rais,

Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) then-President Sohibul Iman, and presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto.



The Solidarity Action for Rohingya Muslims at the West Sumatra Governor's Office Yard on 8 September 2017 was part of a series of demonstrations that swept through Indonesia, including the Aksi 169 rally, in fervent support and sympathy for the Rohingya following the 2017 Rohingya crisis. However, Indonesian attitudes towards the Rohingyas have since changed with the spread of anti-Rohingya hate speech and disinformation on social media. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Sympathy for the Rohingya has continued in recent years. Refugees turned away by Malaysian and Thai authorities were welcomed by Indonesians in North Sumatra upon landing in areas such as Bireuen, Idaman, and Lhokseumawe. Some were even rescued by [local fishermen](#). In June 2020, local authorities pushed the refugees back to sea after giving them food and water, fearing the spread of COVID-19. Still, local villagers [insisted the refugees be allowed back](#) on land and volunteered to feed them. Such hospitality and kindness towards the Rohingya stemmed from ancient Acehese customs and traditions. The Acehese maritime customary law – *Panglima Laot* – obliges fishermen to assist anybody in distress at sea, while the *peumulia jamee* tradition compels villagers to honour guests. This outpouring of Indonesian humanitarian spirit persisted into [2021](#) and [2022](#), marked by many stories of heroism.

From Sympathy to Hatred

Around late 2023, the momentum of sympathy towards Rohingya refugees reversed as Indonesia experienced their most significant influx of refugees since 2015. With the arrival of more than 1,500 Rohingya refugees in Aceh since mid-November 2023, locals were rejecting the newest wave. In at least [two incidents](#) in November 2023, local villagers threatened to push the refugees back to sea with beatings. In a [video](#), locals were seen physically dragging migrants back to their boats.

The situation deteriorated on [29 November 2023](#), when students from Mahasiswa Pemuda Peduli Aceh (MPPA) organised a demonstration, requesting authorities to reject and expel Rohingya refugees from Aceh. Subsequently, on 6 and 18 December 2023, hundreds of Sabang Island residents marched outside refugee tents to protest the continued arrival of Rohingya despite police presence. On [27 December 2023](#), about 200 students protested in front of the provincial parliament in Banda Aceh, with some burning tires on the street. They then marched into a local community hall housing 137 refugees and harassed the women and children there, throwing out

clothes and personal belongings. This forced authorities to relocate the refugees to another shelter. Even then, some students broke through a police cordon to forcibly put Rohingya refugees on trucks bound for the new shelter.

Transnational Transmission of Hate

The turn against Rohingya primarily resulted from the [economic strain](#) on locals in caring for the refugees. This is especially so given that the newest wave was more than double the number of arrivals in 2022. Meanwhile, humanitarian aid and donations from religious organisations decreased, placing the [burden of care](#) squarely upon the shoulders of local non-governmental organisations.

While this explains the downturn in support for refugees, the uptick in hatred is a consequence of hate speech and disinformation on social media that began during the 2020 COVID-19 crisis in Malaysia. In a similar overturn of sentiments, Rohingya refugees arriving in Malaysia during the Movement Control Order (MCO) [triggered](#) a wave of hate speech, disinformation, and incitement to violence. Disinformation spread that Rohingya were carrying COVID-19 into Malaysia and demanding equal rights. Prominent Rohingya activists went into [hiding](#), especially after receiving death threats.

Even as the MCO was lifted, negative stereotypes and hate speech against the Rohingya endured online. [In 2022](#), then-Home Minister Hamzah Zainudin [suggested](#) that Rohingya refugees should return home if they were unhappy with their treatment in Malaysia. When more than 500 refugees escaped from a Malaysian immigration detention centre, social media was rife with calls to send them back. Some even called for their killing. In April 2023, Lawyers for Liberty wrote a [letter](#) highlighting increasingly widespread xenophobic sentiments and calls for violence against Rohingya on social media. These included false claims that Rohingya refugees were stealing jobs or intending to take over the country.

This online environment of hate speech and disinformation crept into the Indonesian social media sphere. Malay comments on TikTok containing hate speech and disinformation against the Rohingya were even adapted to the Indonesian context. [Fake United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\) accounts](#) demonised the Rohingya. [Videos and content](#) depicted the refugees as disrespectful, wasting food aid, unclean, unable to recite the Muslim profession of faith (*shahadah*), and perpetrators of crimes, including vandalism, impersonation, and harassment. Influential accounts on X, Instagram, and TikTok spread low-quality content that reinforced, legitimised, and contributed to the propagation of disinformation against the Rohingya.

After the 7 October 2023 Hamas terrorist attack, disinformation and hate speech against the Rohingya became conflated with the ongoing conflict in Gaza. Conspiracy theories were rife, including claims that the Rohingya were sent to Indonesia [to divert](#) attention from the conflict in Gaza. Worse still, Rohingya refugees were compared to [illegal settlers in Palestine](#). This slant draws on prevalent anti-Zionist and antisemitic sentiments to undermine the previously popular view that [the Rohingya were the Palestinians of Asia](#).

This narrative gradually became widespread from October to December 2023, reinforced by social media influencers. For instance, on [7 December 2023](#), comedian Marshel Widiyanto reposted disinformation by a fake UNHCR account in an Instagram reel, adding that the Rohingya were “[not] occupying through force, but occupying through sympathy”. The conflation of anti-Zionist sentiments with economic grievances likely transformed sympathy into hatred, fuelling the end-December violence against Rohingya refugees in Banda Aceh.

Regional Implications

Rohingya refugees will continue to brave the seas to Indonesia for as long as refugee camps in Bangladesh remain unliveable. However, the Indonesian Foreign Affairs Ministry’s spokesperson and special advisor, Lalu Muhammad Iqbal, [emphasised](#) in November 2023 that Indonesia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and only accepted these refugees for humanitarian reasons. The refugee situation in North Sumatra will remain a pressing concern for the next president.

Indonesia will have to work with Bangladesh, Australia, and its ASEAN neighbours to develop a dignified solution, given the current anti-Rohingya sentiments. Although suggestions have been made to house the refugees in other places in Indonesia, such as [Pulau Galang](#), they have been rejected by the local population. Without a viable and dignified plan for the refugees to eke out their survival, policies that involve placing Rohingya refugees in isolated camps in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia have only encouraged refugees to attempt escapes to find hope elsewhere.

The Rohingya situation in Indonesia presents a critical transnational case of how online disinformation and hate speech can affect vulnerable communities. The evolution from sympathy to hate demonstrates the power of hateful narratives in undermining social relations.

While Singapore may not share the same pressure points as communities directly encountering Rohingya refugees, the prevalence of disinformation and hate speech could form a prejudiced image of the refugee community.

Those seeking to incite hatred tend to draw parallels between seemingly unrelated issues – in this case, illegal settlements in Palestine and Rohingya refugees in Indonesia. It would not be surprising for these points of tension to be manipulated into other contexts involving notions of “native” or “indigenous” and “foreign” or “outsider”. As such, greater cooperation and information sharing among ASEAN countries should be encouraged to combat hate speech and disinformation, preventing conflicts from fomenting.

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