

Before they burn the body, they burn the meaning of the body

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WORLDS INTO WORDS

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THE videos of Rohingya children being chased by adults should not have required a national debate.

They should have produced a moment of collective clarity. Adults threatened children. The children were visibly frightened. The ethical facts of the situation were not especially complicated.

Yet what followed was not clarity but explanation. Public attention moved rapidly away from the children themselves and toward the frustrations that allegedly produced the incident. People spoke about overcrowding, crime, weak enforcement, resource constraints, social disorder and years of unresolved tensions surrounding refugee governance. Before long, the central question was no longer whether the behaviour was wrong but whether it was understandable.

That shift deserves attention because it reveals something important about the current state of public discourse in Malaysia.

For several years, my research has focused on the language through which migrants and refugees become objects of suspicion, resentment and exclusion. More recently, my work has turned toward genocidal discourse and the linguistic conditions under which populations become available for persecution. One of the enduring insights of genocide studies is that violence is not merely organised through institutions and weapons. It is also organised through narratives that redefine who belongs, whose suffering matters and what forms of treatment become imaginable.

These may appear to be distinct areas of inquiry. They are not.

One of the central insights emerging from both fields is that political communities do not simply decide who belongs and who does not. They construct those distinctions through language. Long before policies are enacted, populations are narrated, classified and assigned meaning.

This is why the most consequential forms of exclusion rarely appear in public life as exclusion.

They appear as protection.

They appear as responsibility.

They appear as concern.

In my earlier work on anti-migrant and anti-refugee discourse, what interested me was not overt hostility but the ways in which hostility acquired moral legitimacy. The migrant became a threat to public health. The refugee became a burden on scarce resources. The outsider became a challenge to social order. Exclusion was reframed as care: care for the nation, care for public safety, care for economic stability and care for fellow citizens. The language was often measured, reasonable and recognisably ethical. That was precisely what made it persuasive.

This distinction is important because much of the contemporary debate about the Rohingya still operates within this register. Concerns about governance are real. Questions about registration, employment, education, healthcare, enforcement and national capacity are legitimate political questions. A society has every right to ask how refugee populations should be managed, what responsibilities belong to the state, and what obligations should be shared by regional and international actors.

The existence of these concerns is not the issue.

The more significant development is the emergence of a different discourse alongside them.

Consider the rhetoric that has circulated in recent weeks. We have seen comments about harvesting Rohingya organs. We have seen suggestions that Rohingya should be fed to wild animals. We have seen remarks about kidnapping Rohingya children. We have seen fantasies about locking people in rooms and

burning them alive. We have witnessed adults threatening Rohingya children while others responded with amusement rather than alarm.

These statements are not policy arguments. They do not address refugee governance, border management or institutional reform. They belong to a different symbolic universe altogether.

The issue is not whether those making these remarks genuinely intend to carry them out. Most probably do not. Nor is the issue that every hateful comment inevitably leads to violence. The relationship between discourse and violence is neither mechanical nor inevitable.

The more important question is what these statements reveal about the moral imagination of a society.

Every political community possesses boundaries of the sayable. Certain ideas are rejected not because they are impossible but because they violate shared ethical intuitions. What becomes revealing is not only what people say, but what can be said without disrupting the conversation itself. A remark about burning human beings alive, or a threat directed at children, should ordinarily terminate discussion. Increasingly, however, such statements are absorbed into broader accounts of insecurity, resentment and grievance.

What makes this shift significant is that it alters the centre of public attention. The person experiencing fear, humiliation or vulnerability no longer occupies the foreground. Attention gravitates instead toward the feelings of those expressing hostility. The target becomes context. The aggressor becomes the subject of interpretation.

This dynamic was evident in reactions to the recent videos. One might reasonably expect public discussion to centre on the children themselves: what it means for vulnerable children to be chased, threatened or made objects of ridicule. Yet much of the response moved quickly toward explaining why such incidents occurred and what frustrations allegedly motivated them. The question

shifted from the experience of those targeted to the feelings of those doing the targeting.

This is not a trivial change in emphasis. It represents a redistribution of moral attention.

A society can seek to understand the causes of hostility without allowing those causes to eclipse the experiences of those who bear its consequences. Yet public discourse often struggles to maintain this distinction. Explanations gradually begin to function as justifications. Understanding becomes exoneration. Structural grievances become a lens through which otherwise unacceptable conduct appears more reasonable than it would under other circumstances.

One of the recurring patterns in my research on anti-migrant and anti-refugee discourse is precisely this movement from evaluation to explanation. Rather than asking whether exclusionary claims were justified, discussion increasingly focused on the circumstances that produced them. The burden of interpretation subtly shifted. Attention was directed toward the frustrations of those expressing hostility rather than toward the populations subjected to it.

This is one of the ways exclusion becomes normalised in democratic societies. Not through dramatic declarations of hatred, but through repeated invitations to view hostility primarily from the perspective of those articulating it. The question gradually changes from: What is being done to these people? to: What has made others feel this way about them?

The difference may appear minor. In practice, it is profound. Once hostility is routinely interpreted through the grievances of those expressing it, the suffering of those targeted risks becoming secondary. Statements that would once have provoked immediate condemnation become occasions for explanation, contextualisation and debate.

The Rohingya increasingly function as a vessel into which broader anxieties about governance, insecurity and economic uncertainty are deposited. Concerns

about labour competition, urban congestion, weak governance, inadequate enforcement, political neglect and economic precarity become attached to a single visible population. The complexity of structural problems is condensed into a human category.

This process is politically powerful because it transforms abstract frustrations into tangible objects. Institutional failures become embodied. Systemic problems acquire faces. The refugee ceases to appear as someone navigating vulnerability and instead becomes a visible reminder of unresolved national anxieties.

The first casualty of this process is the specificity of human lives.

The Rohingya cease to appear as workers, parents, children, neighbours or survivors of displacement, persecution and genocide. They become an explanatory category. They become shorthand for a set of grievances that long predate their arrival and will almost certainly outlast their presence.

Public discussions about refugees have always involved disagreement. What appears to be changing is not the existence of disagreement but the symbolic position occupied by the object of disagreement.

The Rohingya are no longer discussed solely as a population requiring governance. Increasingly, they are discussed as a population against which resentment can be expressed.

That distinction matters.

A society can govern a vulnerable population while recognising its dignity.

A society can regulate refugee governance while respecting human worth.

A society can debate rights, resources and responsibilities without imagining cruelty.

Once a population becomes available for humiliation, however, the nature of the conversation changes. The discussion no longer concerns only what should be done. It begins to concern what can be done without provoking moral discomfort.

This is one of the central concerns of scholars who study genocidal discourse. Contrary to popular belief, such discourse does not usually begin with explicit calls for mass violence. More often, it develops through gradual changes in representation: people are redescribed as threats, burdens, contaminants, intruders or problems to be managed. The endpoint is never predetermined. Most societies that tolerate dehumanising rhetoric do not descend into atrocity. Yet such rhetoric remains significant because it alters the moral landscape within which political judgments are made. It changes what appears reasonable, excessive, necessary or regrettable. It influences whose suffering is recognised and whose suffering becomes secondary.

The current Rohingya debate should therefore concern us not only because it tells us something about refugees, but because it tells us something about ourselves.

It reveals the kinds of explanations we find persuasive.

It reveals whose fears command attention.

It reveals the limits of our moral concern.

Most importantly, it reveals whether we remain capable of distinguishing between a disagreement over policy and the degradation of people.

The Qur'anic injunction frequently invoked in these discussions remains politically profound for precisely this reason: "Do not let hatred of a people lead you away from justice" (Quran 5:8).

The verse does not assume affection. It does not require agreement. It does not imagine a world free of conflict, resentment or grievance. It addresses precisely

those moments when such emotions are present and insists that they cannot become substitutes for moral judgment.

That is the challenge confronting Malaysia today.

Refugee governance must be debated, and it must be improved. But the question is whether we can continue to debate it without allowing frustration to become a licence for degradation. The challenge is whether we remain capable of distinguishing between managing a difficult refugee reality and degrading a people fleeing genocide, persecution and statelessness. Once that distinction begins to erode, the issue is no longer refugee policy. It is the range of conduct a society becomes willing to tolerate toward vulnerable human beings.

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The views expressed in this article are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of Sinar Daily.