Three waves of hate speech spreading faster than the pandemic in Malaysia: An analyses of outgroup populist narratives and hate speech during the COVID-19

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Abstract

Societal responses in disquietude circumstances during the corona virus (COVID-19) has been diverse, choosing to express themselves by engaging in online hate speech depending on the locality and pre-existing state of affairs of individual nation states. This exercise argues that there were three waves of hate speech in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first was a nationalistic form narrative targeting the mainland Chinese. The second one was in the form of defending the *ummah* because the *Tabligh* cluster was a large gathering which caused a significant number of infections during the initial stages of the pandemic. The last one was against the global *ummah*, defending the sovereign state and other Malaysians from being infected by foreign and migrant workers, especially the Rohingya refugees. We argue that they are all not in contradictory of each other, but in actual fact, glued by populist narratives of local leaders. The relativist approach, using the qualitative content analysis method was adopted to better understand the underlying factors which led to these manifestations of hate captured online and sometimes its spillover effects expressed in real life. This study concludes that there is an abstract corelation between populist exclusionary statements by political leaders and the responding hate speech sentiments being shared online during the pandemic.

Keywords: Malaysian politics, political communication, political science, refugees

Introduction

It was as recent as 28 February 2020 that the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition took over from the democratically elected Pakatan Harapan (PH) administration amid the rising cases of the novel corona virus (COVID-19) in Malaysia. The first Movement Control Order (MCO) was announced soon after, on 18 March 2020. The uncertainty of the pandemic and the political climate in Malaysia engendered waves of out-group hate speeches. Guided by this debate, this article attempts to contextualize the debate of hate speech with particular reference during the MCO. We argue that there were three waves of hate speech during the MCO in Malaysia, each though unique, can be attributed to the populist narratives of Malaysian political elitists.

During the early stages of the COVID 19 that was rumored to be spreading from Wuhan, China, mainland Chinese tourists were the main targets of hate speech of social media platforms in Malaysia (Tharanya, 2020). There were claims about peculiar eating habits and other forms of hate speech that were flooding social media and short-messaging platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp. This can be attributed as the first wave of hate speech in Malaysia. As the Muhyiddin administration decided to close its corridors to mainland Chinese tourists, there was a steady decline in outgroup hate speech aimed at the people of mainland Chinese. The swift move of collective nationalistic hate speech took a turn towards a more inward-looking domesticated version of ethnically driven hate speech amongst the three dominant races originating from the west of Malaysia.

The second wave of hate speech in Malaysia was mainly targeted toward the Tabligh gathering in Malaysia held in Sri Petaling, a four-day event that was held from February 27 to March 3 that was attended by 16,000 people (14,500 Malaysians and 1,500 foreigners). The Tabligh cluster accounted for the highest number of infections in the country during the MCO. At the beginning of the MCO, a study conducted by Tham (2020) clearly suggests that there was a rise of out-group hate speech on Twitter between all ethnicities, particularly the Malays towards the Chinese and vice versa. The study also indicates there was a decline of hate speech between ethnicities during the MCO. This could have been contributed by the communal efforts taken by the different religious groups that were doing their part in helping Malaysians of diverse backgrounds. Though these efforts promoted solidarity between the different ethnicities, it engulfed into a form of nationalistic xenophobic hate speech aimed at migrant and foreign workers, particularly the Rohingya community.

The social triggers for the rise of this third wave of hate speech is rather speculative. Newspaper reports state that it was ignited through a voice recording of The President of Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organisation Malaysia (Merhrom), Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani, which circulated on WhatsApp and Facebook of him demanding citizenship and equal rights for the Rohingya community (Arjun, 2020). He later denied being the person behind the voice being widely shared over social media and instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram. This exercise attempts to contextualize the waves of hate speech in Malaysia.

There are several contributing factors that needs to be taken into consideration that was contributed to the waves of hate speech in the country. This study adopts the descriptive inference method. The *Verstehen* line of inquiry to 'explain the reasons for intentional action in relation to the whole set of concepts and practices in which it is embedded' was adopted to answer the research questions (King, Keohane & Verba, 1994). Through the relativist ontological lens, we were able to contextually explain the three waves of hate speech in Malaysia without confining ourselves within the constraints of corelating theory and statistical inferences to proof causality. This gave us a better ability to answer the following question: (1) What were the causes for the type of hate speech?; (2) Does populist narratives effect hate speech in Malaysia? To the best of our knowledge this is the first study to explain the different foreign and domestic policies of Najib and the PH government that gives us an understanding of the outcomes of the residues of populist propaganda and its impact on hate speech in Malaysia. Readers of political science, political communications, human rights activists and policy makers will find this paper of particular interest.

Methodological and conceptual framework

The first section of methodology concerns itself "with the logical structure and procedure of scientific enquiry" (Sartori, 1970, 1,033). The second section on methods primarily discusses techniques for gathering and analyzing bits of data.

The ontological and epistemological focus is based in realm of relativism. We understand that perception of hate (dependent variable) is somewhat dependant on populist statements of politicians (independent variable) (Nodelman, Allen, & Perry, 2020). The conceptual relativist is adopted in this study as we understand 'that human beings may construct the real in different ways thanks to differences in language or culture'(Nodelman, Allen, & Perry, 2020). Assuming mind-world monism, we understand that the concepts and theories are productions of the world and the researcher ourselves are part of the world. The qualitative content analysis (QCA) was adopted to ensure the need for a transparent and systematic approach of this study. For this purpose, an internet search of political motivated published by online newsportals such as Malaysiakini, The Star and Malaymail were the inclusion criteria for the purpose of this academic endeavour. The researcher also included other studies on racial relations and populist statements related to the occurrence of hate in Malaysia. The QCA method is a form of textual analysis, the content analysis is used for analysing and interpreting different kinds of texts related to the occurrence of hate speech during the COVID-19 pandemic (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p.160). QCA balances between methodological explicitness and the flexibility of coding categories (Breuning, 2011).

In terms of data validity, textual analysis does not rely on cooperative attitudes of the subjects being analyzed, especially in dealing with sensitive topics such as politicians making populist statements that motivates hate speech. Secondly, it eliminates the altering of behaviours by subjects in realization that they are being observed (Breuning, 2011). In trying to present themselves as 'socially desirable', the QMA method of collecting data is ideal in comparison to alternative data collection methods such as surveying, interviewing or field observations (Halperin & Heath, 2017). Most importantly, QCA has greater ability to capture nuances in meanings and its absences, typically absent through quantitative methods (Breuning, 2011). We have also considered the dangers of paying extra attention to content and evidences that are in support of our own leanings, discounting contradictory arguments (Halperin & Heath, 2017). To reduce this, we made clear attempts to seek disconfirming arguments that were selectively reported after spending considerable amount of time reflecting on those outliers (Rose, 2007). The study confined itself within the context of populist statements and hate speech by politicians, each concept defined below.

There are three different conceptual approaches toward empirically analysing populism; (i) the ideational approach (Cas Mudde), the political- strategic approach (Kurt Weylan) and the socio-cultural approach (Pierre Ostiguy) (Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa & Ostiguy, 2017). Adopting the Mudde's ideational concept of populism helps us understand the national and political cultures in which populist actors mobilize and people see the reality through these localized lenses. Mudde (2017) uses the ideology, the people, the elite, and the general will. Recent work into populist communication takes a more discursive approach in measuring populism as researchers though the dominant conceptualization of populism still revolve around Mudde's (2004) ideation of a thin-centered ideology dividing the pure, ordinary people and the corrupt elites. He further argues that populist 'thin ideology' is ultimately based on 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people' (p.543).

For the purpose of this study, it is important that moralization, dividing the pure people from the corrupt elite, is deliberated in the context of Malaysia that is reflective of its time and space (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Secondly, as first postulated by Michael Freeden (1996), populism is a set of ideas that is limited in scope and ambition with intentions to reach large number of constituency, a 'thin-centered ideology'. Thirdly, populism 'is also about the very

idea that all individuals of a given community are able to unify their wills with the aim of proclaiming popular sovereignty as the only legitimate source of political power' (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2013, p.151).

The fourth aspect that is closely related to hate speech is the component of exclusionary and inclusionary populism. The first aspect of the idea of inclusion/exclusion includes 'distribution of state resources, both monetary and non-monetary' Mudde et al., 2013, p.158). Certain groups are particularly mentioned in state distribution of material resources and other groups are excluded. Political inclusion 'political inclusion specifically targets certain groups to increase their participation and representation', and other groups are singled out (Mudde et al., 2013, p.161). The third is the symbolic realm, where certain groups are singled out of the 'we' of the 'people'. Political elitists sometimes embed hate speech in their populist narratives in view of resonating with the masses against 'corrupt' elitist that are in power. For the purpose of this study, we define hate speech as the disparaging of an individual or group based on characteristics such as race, colour, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or other characteristics (Nockleby, 2000).

Against this backdrop of the conceptual relativist, and QCA methodology, this scholarly endeavour concerned itself with reflecting on the three waves of hate speech that was evidently taking place on social media during the COVID-19 MCO period.

Mahathir Mohamad – China taking over Malaysia

According to Nomura report on Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Malaysia was one of the largest beneficiaries, securing $34.2 billion for infrastructure projects (Lee, 2018). The Johor, Iskandar Forest Project, for an instance rattled UMNO Johor because it allowed many Chinese nationals, or 70% of township to be owned own and lived in by Chinese nationals. In Kuantan, Chinese firms were building a 3,000 acre industrial park and acquired 40-percent stake in the operator of a deep water, multi-cargo port nearby. The China Communications Co Ltd agreed to build the $14 billion East Coast Rail Line that will link the strategic routes of the Straits of Malacca with Malaysia's East Cost on the South China Sea.

The local entrepreneurs were generally feeling left out of the windfall (Lee, 2018). This was the general sentiment of resentment even though, Najib and the then Minister of International Trade and Industry (MITI) Mustapa Mohamed, explained that the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China for the development will have spill over effects that would generate jobs and assist in the development of the less developed states of Malaysia. The Malaysian business communities were not only sceptical, but also frustrated with the Najib administration's economic decision. Leader of the PN government was quoted saying, "Coming in here, buying land, developing luxurious towns, is not beneficial for us,"… "[q]uite definitely, we will review" (Lee, 2018). Najib in turn accused both the former Chief Ministers of the then opposition states, Penang and Selangor, of trying to sell the sovereignty of those states to Chinese interest.

These kind populist statements being repeated over a period of time have a direct effect on building negative perceptions, as it can be observed during the COVID 19 pandemic. During the initial stages of the pandemic, that the first wave of hate speech was manifested by populist statements by both sides of the political divide accusing the other of selling the sovereignty of the Malaysian state. The Malaysian populace are more receptive of their former colonial masters and the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) that follows but are more sceptical of Chinese investments. A further empirical study on perceptions is required on this scientism should be done, but evidence of hate speech by Malaysians toward Chinese tourists on Twitter concludes

that there is a need for such a study (Tham, 2020). The quick turn towards the Christians and the DAP also serves further scrutiny.

The Christian Bogeyman – Najib and JAKIM at the expense of DAP

When more and more people migrated from the rural areas to the more urban West coast of Western Malaysia in search for job opportunities, there was also a concomitant rise and curiosity for spiritual well-being and religion. This provided a form of social network away from home. The *Madrasa*s (Islamic educational spaces) and Christian Cell Groups of the early 60s and Catholic Charismatic of the late 60s and early 70s provided a form of social network for the younger generation to meet and express themselves. This led to the rise of two competing forces that were engaged in occupying the space for religious expression among the Christians, each reaching out to their targeted audiences, steering away from Muslims as expressed in the Federal Constitution to avoid legal setbacks. The establishment of the Bible in Malaya in 1960 that was formed by the Assemblies of God (AOG) saw a rapid rise of AOG churches in the country and many younger Chinese Malaysians joining in mega churches. The Eastern Malaysian versions of protestant churches have also gained prominence and a significant following. The Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB, Borneo Bible Convention) claims to be the largest independent church that has no alignment to broader Protestant ideals which are examples of the 'culturalist perspective' where members of a similar ethnic or religious group share a strong collective identity that influences their decision making even when dealing with existentialists issues. These incidences sometimes cause contentious moments and the state here is expected to play an arbitrary role. The problem is when the state as an arbitrator is influenced by majoritarian rule of a certain ethnicity and the minority contenders have to reorganize themselves to collectively negotiate themselves with state actors, and sometimes it makes more sense to be part of the state.

The 1960s also saw the establishment of organic movements such as the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) and Darul Iqram as claimed by Bustamam (2008) played a role in organizing themselves, getting involved in businesses and making inroads with aspirations to influence the state. The state jealousy responded by forming its own versions of Islamic institutions and movements that were formed to inculcate 'proper' Islamic teachings, appropriation of demeanor and morals according to Islamic teachings, and proselytization of atheists. These agencies include the JAKIM, formed in 1968, YADIM (The Malaysian Islamic *Dakwah* Foundation) in 1974 and PERKIM (Muslim Welfare Organization of Malaysia). These state-funded institutions will continue to grow, at times compete, and establish themselves in urban and rural areas. Similar patterns of development can be seen with the protestant churches in Malaysia. Competition amongst the Protestant pastors for power and influence can also be observed when pastors try to get endorsements from Western televangelists as validation of their theological understanding.

In September 2019, the Deputy President of Parti-Se Islam Malaysia (PAS) made the statement in italics above claiming that the former Deputy Youth and Sports Minister, Steven Sim's speech in his church was a validation that his party is trying to Christianize the state (Syed, 2019). This claim was made by Dr Kamarul Zaman Yusoff of Universiti Utara Malaysia (Northern University of Malaysia who in the past was a fellow for the JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam, Malaysian Department for the Advancement of Islam) - linked Institut Kajian Strategik Islam Malaysia (IKSIM, Islamic Strategic Studies of Malaysia) launched by Najib Tun Razak (former Prime Minister of Malaysia) to champion Islam's stature in the state. In trying to strengthen the Islamic faith, IKSIM has made many allegations in the past to discredit the then Pakatan Harapan (PH) government, one of such claims was that the term Harapan

(Hope) was a covert symbolism of Christianity carrying Evangelical underpinnings (Ahmad Che, 2020). Besides the state, influential leaders have also made claims, feeding into the Christian bogeyman narrative. The state sometimes takes extreme measures by using enforcement agencies in cementing these narratives. The use of the term 'Allah' has been a contentious word and the state has yet to make clear since 2009 whether non-Muslims are allowed to use the term officially. In 2014, 300 bibles were confiscated because it contained the word 'Allah' in it (BBC, 2014). Bibles in the Indonesian language meant for Borneo was also confiscated in the past because it has the word 'Allah' in it. Muslim academicians that I personally interviewed contended that Christians are not allowed to use the term 'Allah' because Muslims do not believe in the concept of Trinity, and the notion that 'humanizing' God by claiming that he had a son is not acceptable. The paranoia of the 'Christian Bogeyman' was made even more prevalent when the Penang State Mufti Wan Salim Wan Mohd Noor intervened to ask local state authorities to reposition their lights so that it does not reflect a cross (Danial, 2019). These symbolic suspicions are not confined within usage of words and architecture, but it involves inter-faith relations too. In 2018, PAS Youth chief Muhammad Khalil Abdul Hadi warned Muslims not to celebrate Christmas as it is against the teachings of Islam adding that "Christmas has an element of *syirik* (idoltary). The narrative that the 'Christian Bogeyman' is always trying to undermine Islam and proselytize Muslims has not only remained within the realm of newspapers discourses, social media postings and political speeches.

These are examples of populist exclusions by politicians continues to sew suspicions between the Muslims-Christians in the Malaysian state. Again, it affirms Tham's (2020) study by The Center that these suspicions tends to be expressed themselves during times of uncertainty and panic like the one experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The third wave of hate speech then was geared towards the foreigners in the country, the Rohingyas in particular were the ones most on the receiving end.

Rohingyas in Malaysia

The migration of Rohingya refugees to Malaysia is not a new phenomenon. There has been a slow migration of Rohingyas since the 1970s until the 2017 crackdown by the Myanmar government that saw larger migration that pushed more to make the perilous journey that does not necessarily translate into a fresh promising new start. Many taking the journey are victims of human traffickers, being sexually exploited or both or under worst circumstances do not make survive the journey (Fortify & Suhakam, 2019), but what entices them to take that perilous journey to Malaysia?

During the Najib Razak administration, the Barisan National (BN) government helped establish the Medan Hospital in Cox Bazar at a cost of 3.5 million Ringgit Malaysia. He was also making other populist statements to include the other ethnicities (Fernandez, & Siva, 2016). It is important to note that Malaysia once prided itself to be highest among the other Asean countries to host Rohingya refugees, and the fourth largest in world. In 2016, Najib himself was in attendance of a pro-Rohingya refugee rally alongside Parti Se-Islam's (PAS), Hadi Awang, and the 10,000 gathered at Stadium Mini Titiwangsa in Kuala Lumpur. Some understood Najib's calls for the solidarity with the *ummah*, the communal bond between Muslims, as a political ploy to garner the support of the majority Malay Muslim base (Tashny, 2017). The domestic realities of Rohingya refugees is contradictory to the promises offered by the Najib administration. The populist statements contradict the realities on the ground.

The World Bank estimates that COVID-19 will drive 70 million people into poverty (Daniel, Lakner, Aguilar, Wu, 2020). Possibly effecting more Rohingyas into poverty post-

COVID 19. As of end June 2020, there are some 177,940 refugees and asylum-seekers UNHCR-registered asylum-seekers and refugees who cannot work legally or attend public school and have limited access to health care (UNHCR, 2020). Out of which the Rohingyas account the most, 101,320. Even more are unregistered. More than 30,000 Rohingya children do not attend any form of formal education, settling for madrassa-style centres managed by volunteers (Tashny, 2017). Many of the Rohingyas are informally employed for low wages. Harassment, exhortation and even detention by authorities for those not registered by UNHCR is not uncommon. Underage marriages and sexual exploitation further burdens the Rohingya community.

Being a vulnerable group, they are an easy target preyed on by drug lords. A turf war that resulted into the shooting of two Rohingyas and one child was the culmination of drug peddling in the Selayang market area (Shuman, 2020). According to the authors accounts on the ground, Malaysian in contact with the Rohingya community in the Selayang market area has not been overwhelmingly positive. Many expressed suspicions that a minority within the Rohingya community that are involved in the drug trade have given a false and bad impression of the already vulnerable community.

Importantly, the Rohingyas have been exposed to the drug trade in Arakan and in Cox Bazar by the Arakan Army's drug trade through its contacts with production centres in the Shan state (Ginke, 2020). The Rohingyas were recruited by the Arakan Army due to their dire circumstances in the Cox Bazar. When five Rohingyas, 4 males and 1 female, were arrested under smuggling charges, their linkages to an international smuggling ring requires further investigations. There were also concerns that the Rohingya community could be vulnerable to extremist behaviour. When a 20-year-old Rohingya refugee who was working in Peninsular Malaysia as a waiter was arrested for trying to conduct a wolf pack attack on the Myanmar embassy in Malaysia, speculations that the vulnerable community can be easily lured into extremism was also stiff.

Malaysia being a predominantly Muslim country has been tolerant of the Muslim Rohingyas in the past, but were reluctant to accept the 200 boat people that were trying to enter the country on April 28 (FMT Reporters, 2020). It was not only the Rohingyas that were subjected to hate speech, but also the defenders of human rights groups and actors that were also victims of hate speech and death threats over platforms like Facebook and Change.org (Khanna, 2020). A Malaysian woman from the European Rohingya Council rights group was threatened with rape on Facebook when she recommended that the Malaysian government allow Rohingyas to disembark from the that arrived on Malaysian shores instead of demanding it to turn back (Khanna, 2020). The spill over effects of online hate speech could be felt in real life when a Rohingya gardener was harassed over his Islamic knowledge.

This turn of events could also be traced to populist statements by the new prime minister. Muhyiddin 'cited has cited the reasons of economic struggles and scarce resources faced by the country due to the coronavirus pandemic for pushing back the Rohingya boat people' (Khanna, 2020). The populist statement by Muhyiddin by disparaging the Rohingyas as a grouping that is taking away Malaysian jobs and opportunities heighten the sentiment of hate towards the Rohingyas, even though they were considered part of the *ummah* in the past. By alluding that the Rohingyas are bringing the disease from foreign land to the coast of Malaysia, perception and sentiments on the ground quickly turned against the Rohingya refugees, notwithstanding the human activists of Malaysian activists too.

Discussions and conclusions

The findings of this study exhibits that there is a close corelation between politicians populist narratives and its manifestations on sewing hate in the state. The first wave of hate speech – nationalistic exclusionary populist statements – were 'thin ideologies' centred on exclusionary narratives against the 'corrupt elite' that were trying to undermine national interest. This coincides with Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's idea that the sovereign is the only source of legitimate power, and that selling of sovereign natural resources was the BN's under Najib mortal sin (2013, p.151). Leaders like Mahathir Mohamad, leader of the PH bloc, used the populist narratives to separate himself from his former party and affiliation with UMNO and Najib, and project himself and the PH government as the defender of the state. While Najib responded that the PH bloc and its leaders were also doing their best to attract FDI from China, it manifested and resonated with the ordinary Malaysian. During the pandemic, as soon as it was made public that it might have originated from China, Malaysians joined in the bandwagon of other countries in expressing hate speech towards the mainland Chinese.

The second wave of hate speech can be attributed by the disparaging populist statements by politicians through mass media and state machinery aimed at the Christians. In galvanizing support for themselves, the state is seen adopting institutions and sometimes employing academicians to sew their populist exclusionary statements of defending the *ummah* against the Christians and Malays that are perceived to be receptive of Western culture (Mudde et al., 2013). The Islamic fundamentalists tend to focus on Western culture of freedom of sexual expression, LGBTQ communities and independent opinionated women as adherents to those of the *Jahiliyyah* (period of ignorance in the Arabic world before the coming of Islam) customs, drawing parallels to those that were of that epoch. Those typically on the receiving end has been Sisters in Islam (SIS) and Muslim political activists such as Siti Kasim. These groups were collectively victims of hate speech during the pandemic.

The third wave of hate speech targeted the *ummah,* themselves. The concept of the *ummah* and nationalism is contradictory. One is to always be in support of fellow Muslims, the other is to support people of the sovereign state. Malaysians of all ethnicities have been kind to the Rohingyas in the past, but the COVID-19 took a different twist. This as explained could be because of the populist exclusionary stance of the Muhyiddin administration which took a one hundred eighty on the handling of foreign and migrant workers, particularly the Rohingyas. In response to taking over during the pandemic and being the defender of Malaysians interest, he announced bank moratoriums and financial aid to the lower income groups. Muhyiddin also alluded that due to the scarcity of jobs and an inevitable financial downturn, he, unlike Najib, would like to focus his economic efforts in providing for Malaysians, and not foreign workers and refugees. Added with the perception that a minority of the Rohingyas were involved in the drug trade in the Selayang market and possible vulnerabilities to extremism, that inclusionary populist narrative could have triggered hate toward the vulnerable refugee grouping. Inclusionary because he now was appealing to the lower income groups of all races. The Muhyiddin administration's populism has a socioeconomic dimension by including the poor that concomitantly shows signs of sociocultural dimension of excluding migrants and aliens.

Unlike the post-modernist European populist radical right that is based on identity and cultural issues rather than material interest, the Malaysian context has both material and cultural populism (Mudde et al., 2013) by both the Muhyiddin and PH government. While in the past the PH governments narrative was centered on material interest of redistribution to tackle inequality among the different states, they also was morphed into identity type populism upon coming into power in 2018. Several factors were contributory to this phenomenon as this analysis exhibits.

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Firstly, the state has been operating on the fringes of right wing extremism since the 1960s in promoting Islamic ideals with an intention to cultivate rural voters in the *kampungs*. Those in power have created and co-opted state machinery such as JAKIM and PERKIM to promote Islamic populism. In an attempt to follow through with left-wing populism, the PH government was faced with a vacuum in promoting its moderate Islamic, *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy to all creations). This vacuum was quickly filled by UMNO-PAS leaders that rallied on identity populism of exclusion, claiming that the DAP government controlled by Christians were controlling the state.

The rise of xenophobic extremism during the COVID-19, can be attributed to exclusionary populism, as this study proves. Primarily based on redistribution of wealth among Malaysians during the COVID-19 pandemic, and excluding the migrant and foreign workers, particularly Rohingyas that were presumably 'making claims' to be naturalised as Malaysians. Some explanations over why the non-Muslims shared concerns over the Rohingyas could be because they felt that the Rohingyas could make claims after being naturalized as the new *bumiputeras* in Malaysia, since they were Muslims, assumed Malay customs and could speak the Malay language as enshrined under the constitution. The Malay Muslims may have shared assumptions, having to share the limited and shrinking material resources with a new group that may include many more refugees that will come in the future, undeniably a great pulling factor for future refugees. That may have also prompted responses from Najib that they, the refugees, were being too demanding. The conceptual framework and descriptive paper exhibits that future research using an empirically driven survey research design will further validate its findings.

Acknowledgments

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