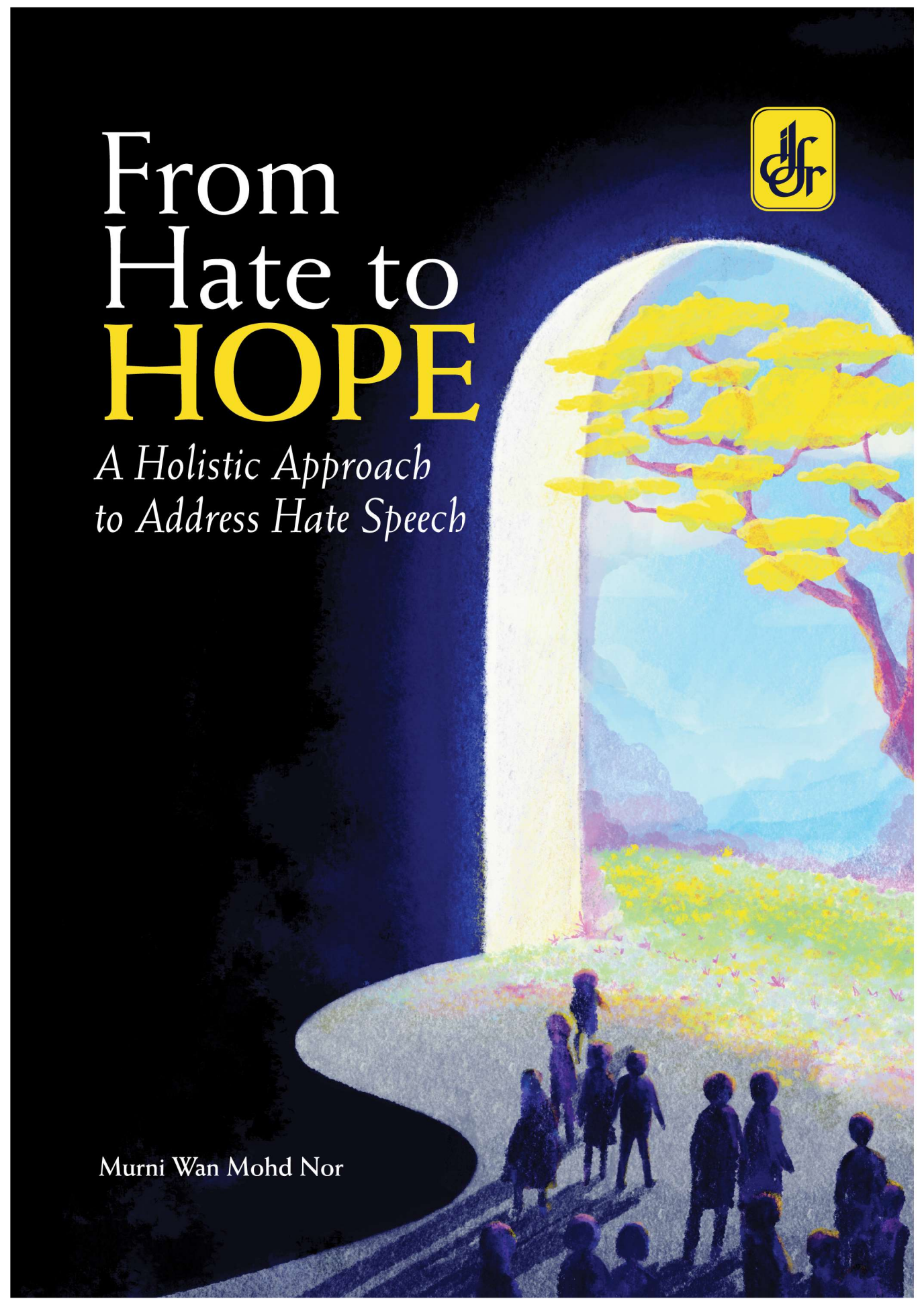
From Hate to HOPE

A Holistic Approach to Address Hate Speech



Murni Wan Mohd Nor

From Hate to Hope:
A Holistic Approach to Address Hate Speech

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Raise your words,
not your voice. It is the
rain that grows flowers,
not thunder.

Jalaluddin al-Rumi

FOREWORD

بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ

In an era marked by unprecedented global connectivity and rapid information exchange, the phenomenon of hate speech has emerged as a pressing and multifaceted challenge. This book, "From Hate to Hope: A Holistic Approach to Address Hate Speech," addresses a critical issue that transcends borders and impacts societies worldwide, including Malaysia.

Hate speech, with its capacity to sow division and discord, poses a grave threat to social harmony and international relations. In Malaysia, a nation celebrated for its rich cultural diversity and harmonious coexistence of various races and religions, hate speech presents a significant risk. Its manifestations—ranging from racism and Islamophobia to xenophobia and violent extremism—undermine the principles of equity, justice, and mutual respect that are essential for the functioning of a peaceful and harmonious society.

The adverse impact of hate speech can fuel discrimination, breed intolerance, and incite conflict. The repercussions are felt both personally by the victim and collectively by the targeted groups. This affects how communities interact and how nations perceive one another. In Malaysia, the consequences of hate speech can destabilise our social fabric, strain inter-community relations, and complicate both national and foreign policies.

In this book, Dr. Murni highlights a holistic, whole-of-nation approach that brings together the Government as well as all stakeholders—most importantly the Malaysian public—in the design and execution of effective initiatives to address hate speech. This is significant because the responsibility to counteract hate speech does not rest solely with diplomats, government officials, and leaders; it extends to everyone engaged in communication and diplomacy. Each of us plays a role in shaping the discourse that defines our interactions. In Malaysia, maintaining harmony among diverse communities is crucial. Thus, we must approach conversations on sensitive issues with care, consideration, and wisdom. Doing so can help diffuse tension rather than exacerbate it, contributing to a more inclusive, tolerant, and respectful society.

As we navigate the complexities of addressing hate speech, let us remember that effective communication and diplomatic strategies are essential tools in our collective effort to combat prejudice and build a more just world. This book offers valuable insights and practical guidance for all who are committed to this essential mission. In our shared endeavour to overcome hate speech, our approach must be marked by empathy, respect, and a steadfast commitment to positive change.

May this publication serve as a stepping stone for meaningful action, facilitating current efforts to address hate speech and nurture a global community where every individual is valued and heard.

Dato' Syed Bakri Syed Abdul Rahman
Director General,
Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR).

PREFACE

بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent and the Most Merciful. All praises are due to Him. Prayers and salutations be upon Prophet Muhammad SAW, his family, his companions, and those who remain sincere and steadfast in following the *Deen* of Islam.

I have long believed in the concept of *muhibbah*, a term that perfectly describes Malaysia. This is because this term does not merely mean tolerance, but more importantly, highlights the kindness, respect, and justice we demonstrate towards people of other cultures, races, and religions. This has always been the Malaysia that I have known and loved—where people of different races and religions respect one another and live peacefully together, where our diversity is a blessing and our source of strength.

That said, the peace and harmony we enjoy as Malaysians should not be taken for granted. We have seen instances that attempt to sow discord amongst our people by emphasising perceived differences through hate speech, racism, and acts of intolerance. I have been a victim of hate speech at different stages in my life–throughout my early childhood until my adult life. The instances of hate speech attempt to demean different aspects of my identity but the hurt and fear I feel are the same. Having personally been on the receiving end of both face-to-face and online vitriol, it has made me even more determined to be part of the solution, rather than contribute to the problem.

From Hate to Hope is an overview of my 14 years' worth of research and observations—summarised in the pages of this humble book. This book is not meant to address all issues at length, but I hope it can serve as a good resource for those who wish to understand the complexities of hate speech in Malaysia. More importantly, it highlights the importance of a holistic, whole-of-nation approach to address hate speech—where every member of society could play a significant role in collaboration and not in isolation with the government.

This is the main argument that I put forth in this book. We are all leaders within our circle of influence. And with that comes the responsibility to ensure that we end the cycle of hatred that is spreading in our community. The question is, what will we do?

In an increasingly polarised world, we must be moderate when reacting to hateful expressions and actions. In the Qur'an (2:143) it is stated,

> *and thus, We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you may bear witness to the truth before all of mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you.*

Although we must do our best to prevent the spread of hatred, racism, and discrimination in our capacities, we are not able to control the actions of others. What we do have control over are the choices we make and the actions we take. For instance, what will we do when we are responding to offensive ideas, pejorative arguments, and attacks that go against the most fundamental aspects of our identity? Will we take the easy way and fight fire with fire? Or will we exercise restraint, compose well-reasoned arguments, and *respond with what is better?*

In writing this book, I have considered many things, but my highest priority is to present my research findings and observations in a way that does not exacerbate the problem. Rather, I hope this book can, in a small way, raise awareness about the devastating harms of hate speech--and highlight a more peaceful way forward.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

الْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ رَبِّ الْعٰالَمِينَ

I would like to thank Dato' Syed Bakri Syed Abdul Rahman, Director General of IDFR, for entrusting me with writing this book on a delicate but important issue. Dato' Syed Bakri has offered me invaluable support from the moment I started my secondment at IDFR, which has allowed me the opportunity to push myself out of my comfort zone, expand my horizons, and accomplish projects that I hope add value to IDFR.

My appreciation also goes to the team at Centre for Political Studies and Economic Diplomacy (PSED), particularly Mrs. Jasmine, for believing that this book was worth publishing and offering advice where needed. Mr. Harvinder, PSED's acting director, has also provided much support to me, which greatly facilitated my work at IDFR. Thank you to Mr. Muziru, Mrs. Farhah, Ms. Aida Yasmin, Ms. Hanun and Mr. Raj, as well as interns Mr. Kamal, Ms. Hawa, Mr. Izzat and Ms. Wan Hui for assisting with the overall process of getting the book ready for publication. I must also thank the administrative assistants of IDFR such as Mr. Khidir, Mrs. Filza, Mrs. Nik Khalilah, Mrs. Norazlin, the Director General's secretary, Ms. Nik Latifah as well as the team at the IDFR library for helping me with other technical aspects of this book.

To my dear friends, who are too many to mention by name…you know who you are. The Prophet Muhammad SAW was reported to have said the best of companions are, "One whose appearance reminds you of God, and whose speech increases you in knowledge, and whose actions remind you of the Hereafter." This hadith best describes my circle of friends who have helped me become a better person. Thank you for being my cheerleader, for encouraging me to pursue exciting opportunities, for helping me fight off my self-doubt, and for motivating me to be the best I can be.

I must mention my family, who have done so much to assist me in many ways. The challenges of working women seem insurmountable at times--but things are made easier with such a wonderful support system. When I was burning the midnight oil to get the book ready, my sisters Ilham, Asma, and Sofiya, and brothers-in-law Ernad, Syafiq, and Aiman all stepped in to send or pick up my children and provided me with the peace of mind that my children had been taken care of. I could never repay you for all that you have done, but I will never stop trying to.

To my parents, Prof. Dr. Wan Mohd Nor and Prof. Dr. Ratnawati Mohd Asraf, words cannot express the impact you both have had on my personal and professional life. Ever since I was a young child, you have instilled the importance of sincerity, exemplified the meaning of integrity, and established a knowledge culture in our home that guided me well into my adult life. I am what I am, because of who my parents are.

To my children, Sumayyah, Hamzah, and Uthman. Thank you for being the light in my life and my inspiration. Everything that I do, is for the three of you. I hope to make you proud and inspire you to pursue your dreams, too.

Last, but not least, my gratitude goes out to my best friend and husband, Shahir Ab Razak. When I received the offer to be an Expert Researcher at IDFR, you did not hesitate in encouraging me to take it, even though it would mean our family life may change significantly for the next few years due to the long commute, travelling requirements, and new responsibilities I may be entrusted with. That is just the man that you are–always supportive of my dreams. When people ask me how I manage to do what I do, the answer is: because of you. You are my debating partner, the jokester who brightens my dark days, my spiritual significant other, and most importantly, my Imam. Whenever I think that I can't go on, you always hold my hand and say that I can. My life is forever changed because of you, and I couldn't be more grateful.

May this book be accepted by Allah SWT as my act of *ibadah*, with my prayer that it may become a means of promoting peace and justice. Whatever that is good, is from Allah SWT and whatever that is not, is a result of my weakness alone.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AOD	Architects of Diversity
AOT	Administrator of Telegram
AI	Artificial intelligence
AICHR	ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BN	Barisan Nasional
CIJ	Centre of Independent Journalism
CMA	Communications and Multimedia Act 1998
CSOs	Civic Society Organisations
DAP	Democratic Action Party
DL	Deep learning
ECRI	European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GAO	Government Accountability Office
IDFR	Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations
IIEE	Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers
LEARN	Leveraging Educators Against Radical Narratives
MAGERAN	National Movement Council
MCMC	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
MERHROM	Rohingya Ethnic Human Rights Organization of Myanmar Malaysia
MOE	Ministry of Education
ML	Machine learning
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NLP	Natural language processing
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territories
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (The Malaysian Islamic Party)

PBB	Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu
PH	Pakatan Harapan
PN	Perikatan Nasional
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PPPA	Printing Presses and Publications Act
PUTRA	Parti Bumiputera Perkasa Malaysia
RMP	Royal Malaysian Police
3Rs	Race, religion, and royalty
SA	Sedition Act
SEARCCT	Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism
UCR	Uniform Crime Reporting
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WOS	Web of Science
YDPA	Yang di-Pertuan Agong

LIST OF LEGISLATIONS

Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 [Act 588]

Election Offences Act 1954 [Act No. 5 of 1954]

Federal Constitution [Act 000]

Penal Code [Act 574]

Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 [Act 301]

Sedition Act 1948 [Act 15]

LIST OF FIGURES

Virulent and hate-laden advocacy can trigger the worst of crimes. Suffice it to recall recent examples of post-electoral violence spurred by hatred along ethnic lines; incidents involving extremist groups; abusive and malicious portrayal, online or in traditional media, of certain religions and their followers. It is clear that hatred has many faces and is present in all parts of the world.

Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2003)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The problem of hate speech is nothing new. However, the advent of social media has escalated the problem significantly, as it is integrated into all aspects of our lives–from the education sector to the publication of news, and even daily communication with our friends and family. This increases the risk of being exposed to hate speech by opening new avenues for online harassment. The first step to understanding the complex problem of hate speech is having a clear understanding of its definition.

1.1 What is Hate Speech? Differences in Definitions According to Jurisdiction

The definition and subsequent interpretation of hate speech differs based on the legal framework of each country. Previously, the scope of hate speech applied to main identity factors such as race, religion, and nationality.[1] Variations in legal definitions are to be expected, as they reflect the norms and values of a particular people which change over time. The United Nations's Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines it as:

> *Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.*[2]

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), in its General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating Hate Speech from 2016, defines hate speech as:

> *The use of one or more particular forms of expression – namely, the advocacy, promotion or incitement of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well as any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat of such person or persons and any justification of all these forms of expression – that is based on a non exhaustive list of personal characteristics or status that includes "race", colour, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation."*[3]

In Malaysia, the term "hate speech" has never been defined in any legislation. This becomes the first stumbling block in the fight against hate speech. It is akin to shooting in the dark–without knowing what or where to aim, we are more likely to miss the target. The limitations within the current legal framework are elaborated in Chapter 4.0. The issues of hate speech that are analysed in this book is guided by the author's proposed definition of hate speech:

> *Any form of expression (speech, writing, picture, symbol, digital content, and so on) which may reasonably encourage feelings of enmity, hatred and hostility, or may incite discrimination or violence against a person or a group of persons, based on protected identity factors such as gender, disability, lineage, ethnicity, race, religion, and nationality.*

The main elements of the definition above (reflected in Figure 1) take into consideration the realities of the Malaysian context when it comes to the issue of hate speech. However, it is not a legal definition, as it does not explain the evidentiary requirements, the burden of proof to be met and so on, which is why having a definition for hate speech according to Malaysian law is so important. Doing so would strengthen the national and legal framework to address hate speech in Malaysia, and this is elaborated further in Chapter 4.0.

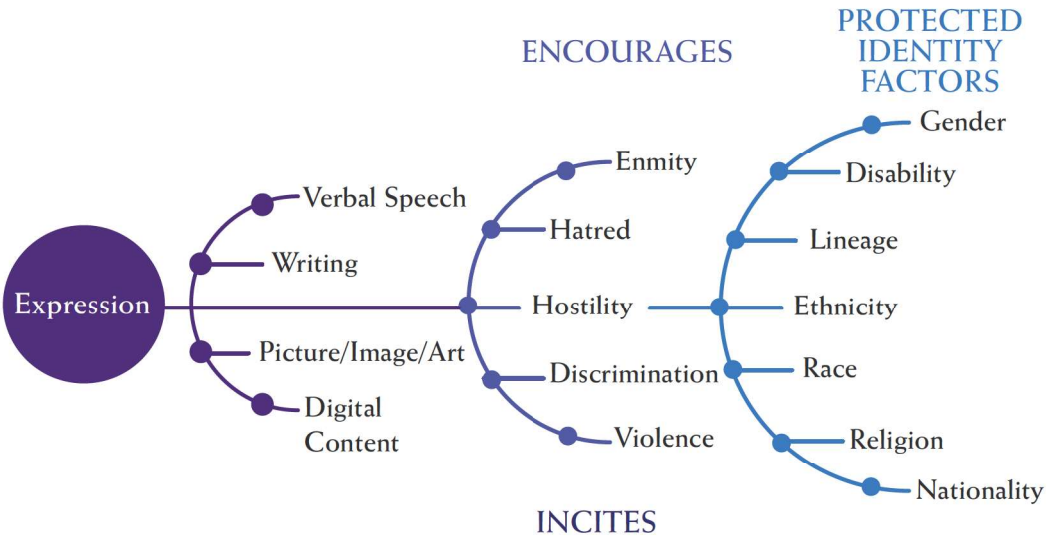

Figure 1: Main elements in the proposed definition that were made to reflect the realities of Malaysia's national framework.

2.0 OVERVIEW OF HATE SPEECH

2.1 Issues of Hate Speech

Hate speech is not a new phenomenon. However, how it evolved has made it a global problem of epic proportions. This is because hate speech is no longer confined to victims or targeted groups through physical or face-to-face interactions but can attack someone beyond national borders through the usage of digital technologies such as the internet. This also means that the impact of hate speech on victims may be even more devastating, as online hate speech can reach a much wider audience. In addition, even if the posting is removed, hate speech can never be truly erased once it has been published online. This is because the content can be screenshot, downloaded, saved, and shared by virtually anyone–which continues and prolongs the cycle of harassment.[4]

The adverse effects of hate speech are not confined to the online space. For example, research conducted by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) analysed data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)'s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program on hate crimes that occurred on the internet between January 2016 and December 2021 and highlighted the connection between online hate speech and hate crimes, including terrorism and violent extremism.[5] This can be seen in the terrorist attack by shooting Muslim worshippers at a mosque in Christchurch (New Zealand), at a Walmart in El Paso (Texas) to target Hispanic immigrants, and at a synagogue in Halle (Germany). All three attackers had published online manifestos or open letters to air their grievances regarding Muslims, Hispanics, and Jews who were perceived as threats to their society in different ways.[6]

The power of hate speech in influencing others towards hate crime, terrorism, and violent extremism underscores the severity of the problem which affects all communities all over the world. Thus, the main source where hate speech occurs needs to be identified for the source of the fire to be extinguished.

What we must eliminate are systems of representation that carry with them the authority which has become repressive because it doesn't permit or make room for interventions on the part of those represented.

Edward W. Said

2.2 Main Sources of Hate Speech

2.2.1 Social Media

Social media is a major platform where hate speech is observed. A study conducted by UNESCO in 16 countries which included 8,000 respondents identified 67% of internet users have encountered it online. Based on their experience, users feel that hate speech is most prevalent on Facebook (58%), followed by TikTok (30%), X (18%), and Instagram (15%).[7] Their experiences are in line with statistics that revealed Facebook removed 9.6 million pieces of hateful content during the third quarter of 2023. This number, albeit high, is significantly lower than the period between 2020 to 2021, whereby Facebook had to remove a staggering number of more than 31 million posts containing hate speech.

Although data provided by Meta shows that hate speech is most commonly found on Facebook, that does not mean the level of hate exhibited on different social media platforms is not serious. For example, in a post on X showing Afghan migrants protesting in Paris for their families, the online comments such as Figures 2 and 3 highlight demands to deport them, with many users resorting to stereotypes of polygamy, to more dangerous expressions of violence.

Figure 2: An example of a comment by an X user.

In sum, Islamophobia works in both Western and Muslim countries as a discriminatory practice against what is perceived as 'civilizational backwardness' that legitimizes, if necessary, the use of violence, as can be seen with deadly military crackdowns on free elections. This dynamic is intensified and strengthened by the constant humiliation of Muslims and Muslim lifestyle in the media and social media in Muslim countries.

Enes Bayrakli, Farid Hafez and Leonard Faytre

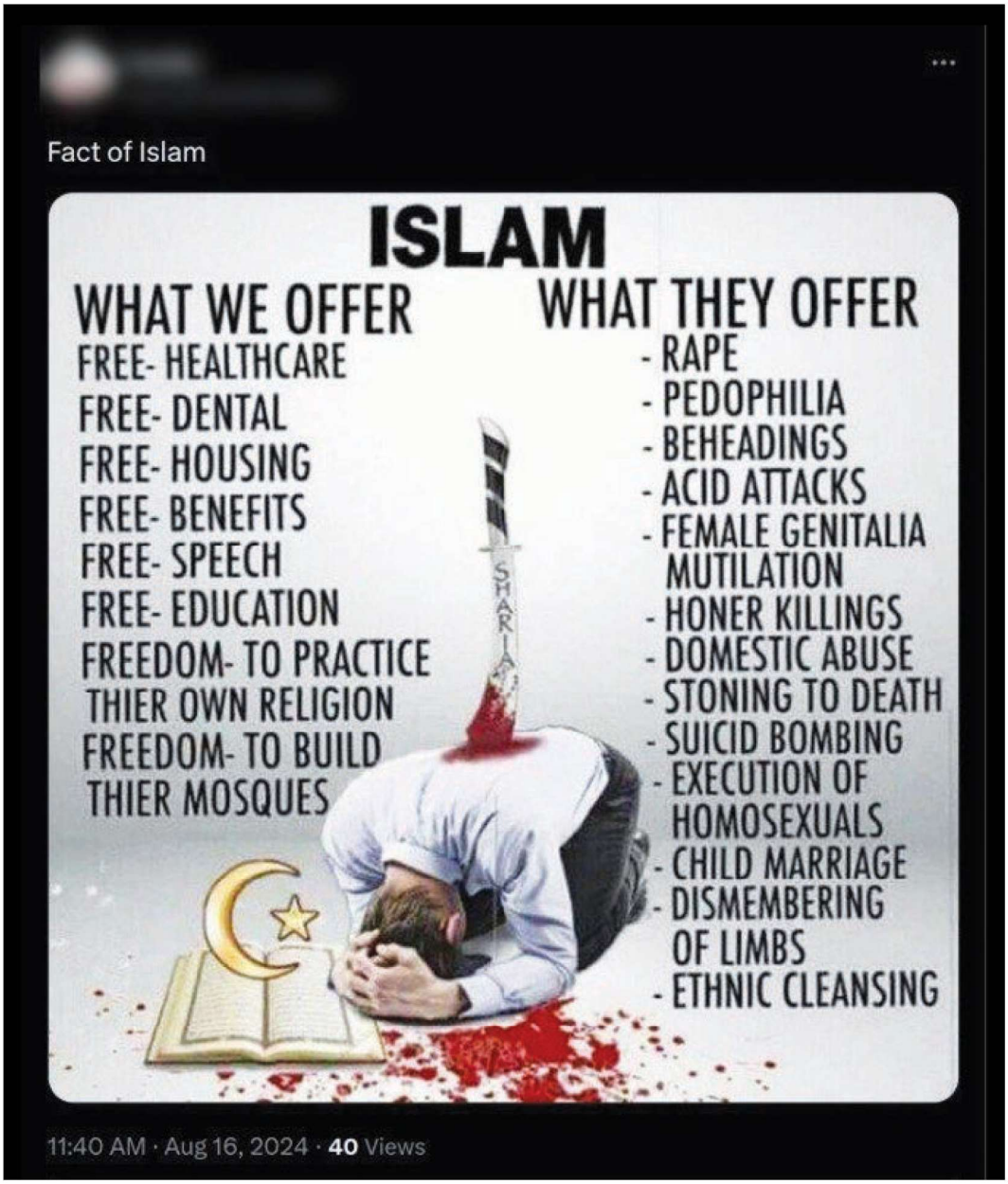

Figure 3: Some of the many hateful social media comments against migrants in general and Muslims in specific.

This worrying trend of employing hate speech online can lead to many undesirable effects. The Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), António Guterres, has warned about the stigma and discrimination caused by hate speech on social media. He noted that hate speech is "massively amplified by the power of digital platforms and tools that enable it to spread across borders and cultures."[8]

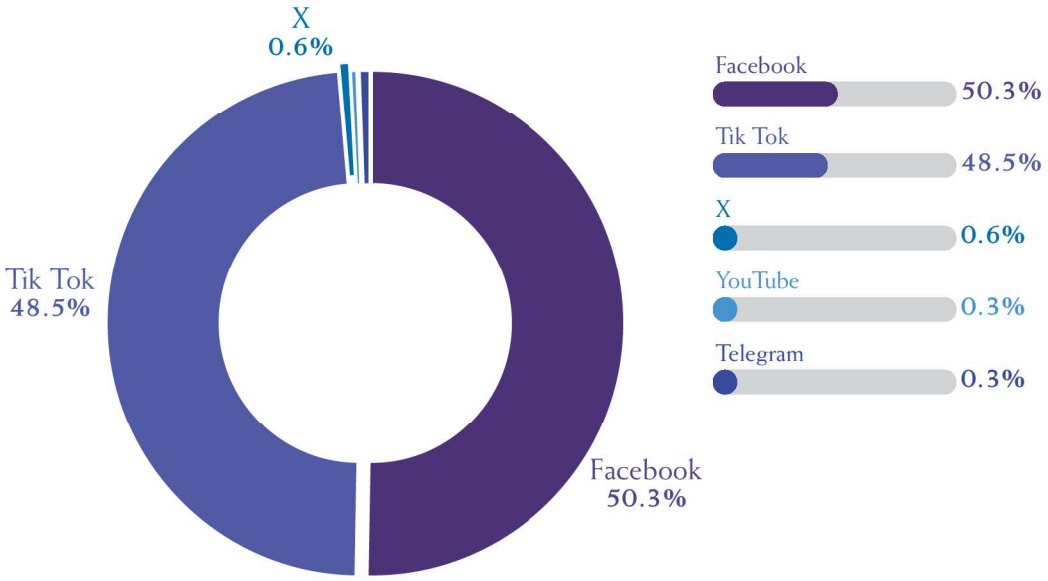

Figure 4: Statistics of offensive content removed by the MCMC from January-March 2024.

In Malaysia, statistics regarding incidences of hate speech are equally worrying. According to the Deputy Communications Minister, Teo Nie Ching, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) has taken down 1,454 hateful/offensive posts related to the three major issues of race, religion, and royalty (3R) from January to March of 2024. The highest number of 3R-related content removed were from Facebook (50.3%), TikTok (48.5%), and X (0.6%), followed by YouTube (0.3%) and Telegram (0.3%), which are reflected in Figure 4. In comparison, the MCMC only removed 1,633 offensive, 3R-related posts for the entirety of 2023.[9] The sharp increase in reported cases is concerning but unsurprising, as findings from a survey on hate speech in Malaysia conducted by The Centre revealed 91% of the 600 respondents observed it was most prominent on social media.[10]

In addition, the threat posed by online hate speech is that it may encourage hate crime in the physical world. One unique study which adopted the Computational Criminology methodology was able to connect police crime, census, and Twitter data to establish a temporal connection between online hate speech, and offline racially and religiously aggravated crimes in London over eight months.[11] Thus, it is clear that the negative effects of hate speech are exacerbated through social media–which encompasses all aspects of our personal and professional lives, resulting in greater and more lasting trauma.

As long as the general population is passive, apathetic, diverted to consumerism or hatred of the vulnerable, then the powerful can do as they please, and those who survive will be left to contemplate the outcome.

Noam Chomsky

2.2.2 *Political Communications*

The harms of hate speech are well documented, but some categories of hate speech may present a more serious threat than others. Scholars have argued that the behaviour and discourse of political elites have influenced the prejudiced actions of the public–which sometimes manifests in hate speech and hate crimes.[12] For example, Theresa May's speech post-London terror attack in 2017 may have intended to unify a nation following a horrible tragedy, but discourse analysis of her speech identified themes of 'othering' the Muslim population in general, normalised the 'enemy' amongst the British people, and constructing people of colour as suspects in the 'War on Terror'– all of which may have contributed to hate speech as reflected in the comments sections of online news outlets such as the Daily Mail.[13] This is also supported by findings of a study on Trump's 2016 Presidential campaign utilising an online survey that revealed exposure to Trump's racially charged speech caused respondents that participated in the research to adopt a negative viewpoint of the Latino community, which affected their behaviour towards this community and emboldened their actions.[14] The situation is not exclusive to Western countries and their leaders alone. Research in Japan regarding Yuriko Koike, Governor of Tokyo's statement about the memorial ceremony for Korean massacre victims suggests her announcement led to an increase in hate posts and hate users during the time frame of the study.[15]

The power of hate speech within political communication which is shared on social media can also be seen in Malaysia. A study by The Centre highlighted 60% of respondents perceived politicians as the 3rd highest source of hate speech in Malaysia.[16] Other studies conducted in the Malaysian context reveal that the 'politics of hate' has been utilised by some politicians as reflected in their political communication which contains sarcastic content, satire, and accusations.[17]

If this situation carries on, it may influence the public to adopt a hostile attitude towards people of other groups based on identifying factors such as race, religion, and nationality. Teo Kok Seng attributes the racial and religious tensions to certain factors such as divisive speech among certain politicians.[18] For example, during Pakatan Harapan (PH)'s 22-month administration after the 2018 General Elections, the public utilised social media to vent out their dissatisfaction regarding the administration by posting polarising speech, which some analysts have attributed PH's subsequent loss of power to Perikatan Nasional (PN) in 2020 to politicised issues which stirred racial and religious tensions.[19] This reinforces the argument that hate speech is not only socially disruptive, but may also lead to political instability.

Hate speech on its own is already insidious but when politicians participate in it, it adds a sense of legitimacy to the public, who may be influenced by what is being said.[20] A recent study was conducted on hate speech spread via TikTok by analysing videos related to Malaysia's 15th General Elections, whereby 679 videos with over 1,000 views were analysed. The results show that 373 TikTok videos contained hate speech, with 264 featuring hate speech with ethnic and religious undertones. The study found that hate speech in the Malay language generally focused on non-Malays while hate speech in the Chinese language targeted issues related to Malays and Islam.[21]

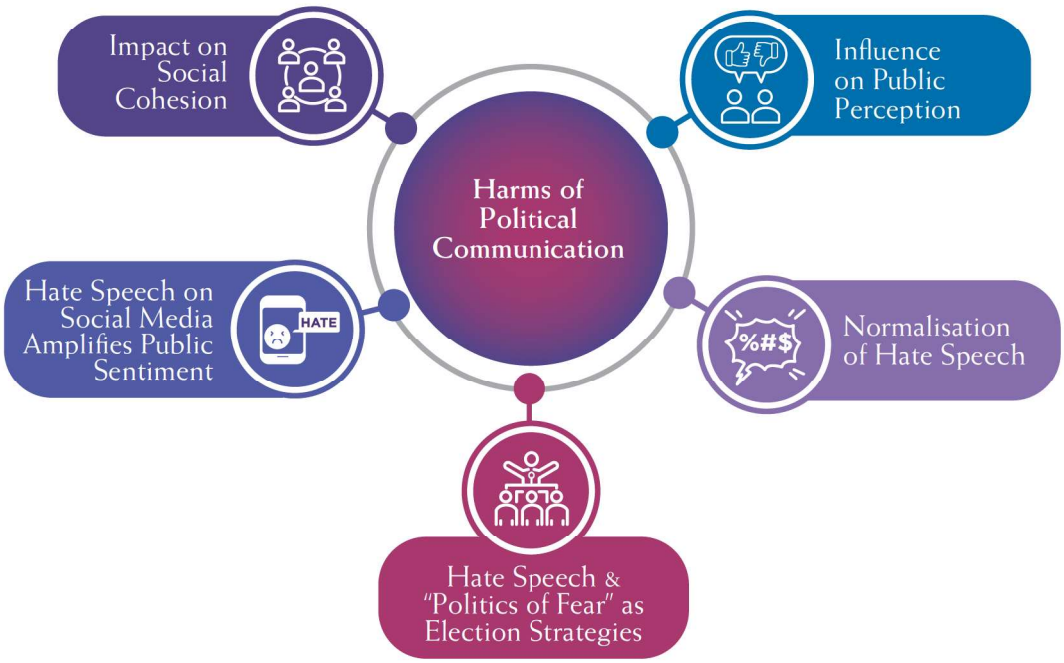

Figure 5: Harms of political communication.

The use of divisive rhetoric by some politicians has insidious effects that cannot be underestimated. Countries which have higher incidences of hateful political rhetoric tend to have a higher level of violence through domestic violence–with an average of 107.9 domestic terrorist attacks between 2000-2017.[22] Many governments acknowledge the aggravating factor when politicians engage in hate speech, thus certain legal systems have increased punishments for offenders in this category. At present, Malaysian law does not differentiate offenders based on their level of influence, which could contribute to the indifference shown by certain politicians who continue to participate in the 'politics of hate.'

The "politics of fear" have been employed by certain politicians from various political parties, who disregard the effect that polarising speech may have on racial and religious relations.[23] The act of promoting animosity and hatred among the different classes of persons in Malaysia is not a matter that is taken lightly. S. 4 of the Election Offences Act[24] is meant to prevent voters from being influenced to vote based on racial and religious sentiments, as well as to protect the people from related hostilities. If a person is found guilty under S. 4 of this Act, one may be barred from voting, or if he/she was elected as a representative in the legislature, the seat would need to be vacated. Despite the strong legal repercussions, the Asia Centre found that some of the main initiators of disinformation (which includes hate speech) are political parties and/or campaign managers.[25]

This is supported by our findings from an interview with the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP). It was revealed that politicians of different political parties from opposite ends of the political spectrum utilised this strategy to 1) expand their influence, 2) increase supporters, and 3) gain more votes. The RMP gave examples that certain parties would speak about the threat of racial riots similar to that of 13 May 1969 if Malays did not vote for them. These sentiments were very prominent during the 15th General Elections in 2022, and Malaysia's 10th Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, referred to as PMX, was reported by Reuters to have said, "I am concerned to see the racist sentiments and rhetoric that continue to be espoused by a few with desperate and vested interests."[26]

The author observes that the topic of royalty, religion, and race are sensitive to the Malaysian public and can quickly result in controversy and increase tension—particularly when said by people with influence, such as politicians. This is because it puts different groups on opposing sides and heightens fear among the people about the threats posed by other parties that are perceived as not being aligned with their best interests. These troubling political strategies must come to an end, as such polemics have dangerous repercussions for society–which can upset public order and national security.

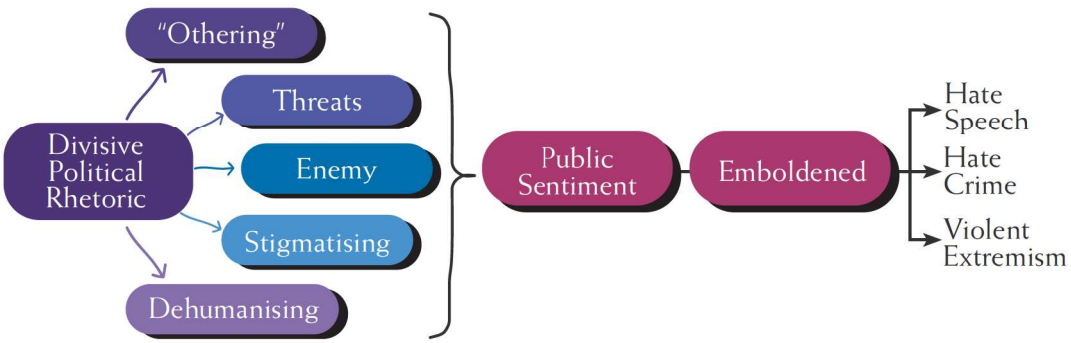

Figure 6: Adverse impact of divisive political rhetoric.

The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the minds of the masses.

Malcolm X

2.2.3 *News Outlets*

Today, news outlets have a heavy online presence by incorporating social media into their journalism practices. News outlets—both alternative and mainstream—have been observed to exacerbate hate speech through problematic media practices like provocative headlines, misleading images, stereotypical terms, and divisive language. These worrying practices contribute to numerous instances of intersecting modes of hate speech contributed by readers of news outlets that take to social media to vent out their every thought. For example, in the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) report on rising hate speech and racist violence in the UK, the ECRI criticised Britain's The Sun and Daily Mail for using "offensive, discriminatory and provocative terminology,"[27] and one such example is reflected in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Example of The Sun's misleading headlines, coupled with a provocative image that was printed on the front page of their newspaper.

In Malaysia, similar problems are observed. According to a survey conducted by The Centre among 605 respondents, the mass media (such as online news sites, print news, and television) was the second biggest platform and respondents observed hate speech to be most prevalent.[28] This is not surprising, as how the media reports on issues can influence the perception of readers and impact them positively or negatively. Hateful tweets in Malaysia during the early stages of the pandemic revealed most instances were precipitated by news reports.[29]

A UNDP-commissioned study in 2022 analysed 207 news articles on critical issues during the height of the pandemic and identified the impact on public sentiment as reflected in social media comments. The findings, summarised in Figure 8, revealed certain problematic media practices, such as the incorporation of clickbait headlines, provocative (and sometimes unrelated pictures), divisive language and stereotypical terms, and lack of diversity in perspectives and sources in published articles focusing on certain issues.[30]

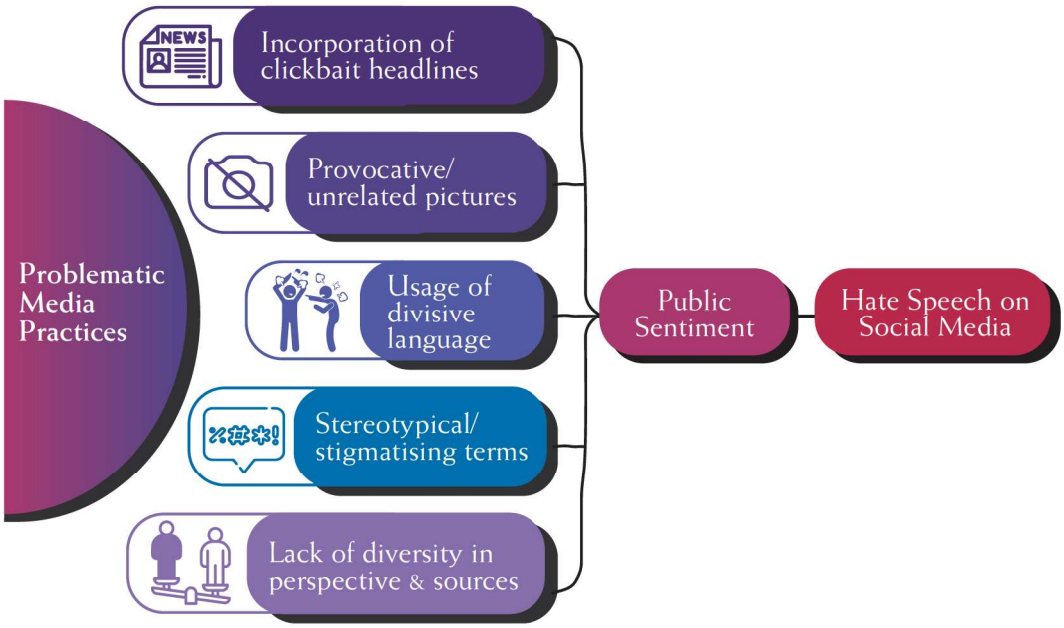

Figure 8: Problematic media practices in Malaysia.

Negative narratives and polarising language used by the media can heighten pre-existing intergroup anxiety, racism, and xenophobia–sentiments which are expressed through hate speech and amplified on social media. This may result in increased distance and feelings of enmity between groups. At the extreme end, it can and has escalated to hate crimes with elements of violence. As such, the media plays an important role in mediating the effects of hate speech through careful, considerate, and ethical media reporting.

Unfortunately, certain media practices today have been observed to fall below ethical standards due to the priority of attracting higher readership and generating better revenue. In many cases, the media negatively represent racial and religious issues which are known to be very sensitive in the Malaysian context, by relying on provocative headlines to gain attention. Research has indicated that negative words in news headlines increase the propensity of users to access the article. In contrast, the incorporation of positive words in headlines resulted in fewer clicks.[31] The findings provide insights into the reasons why media practices appear to rely on sensationalist headlines. While the media need to gain more revenue to sustain their operations, it should not be at the expense of triggering racial and religious tensions, as negative headlines may have severely negative effects on the social trust and behaviour of the public.[32]

The role of images in the overall reading of an article cannot be underestimated. Research has revealed that images with a caption lead to higher involvement levels by readers than an article with no images.[33] In addition, images that represent tension and conflict result in increased attention of the reader.[34] This is why the media must ensure that images chosen to accompany a headline or incorporated into an article are carefully selected. Unfortunately, certain media outlets have adopted the practice of publishing images that conjure negative sentiments, or incorporation of images that have nothing/ little to do with the subject matter of the article.

Scholars have observed that the visuals used in media narratives shape public opinion and popular culture–including internalising bias depicted through texts and images.[35] This was the case of The Star Newspaper, which had published a picture of Muslims performing congregational prayer in a mosque, along with the headline, "Malaysian Terrorist Leader" on their front page,[36] reflected in Figure 9. The pairing of the headline on terrorism with the unrelated picture of peaceful congregants in prostration to their Creator is likely to result in a negative association among readers that terrorism is related to Muslims and Islam. The Star was widely criticised for their mistake which The Star has apologised for. However, once something is posted online, it leaves an impression on people hence, an apology may not undo the damage already done. The incident also suggests that the practice and publication process within the media suffer from a lack of foresight and sensitivity.

The media also tends to focus more on polarising narratives compared to positive ones. For example, a study has identified that in 197 articles published on Islamisation during the period researched, the major themes were: 1) fear of Islamisation, 2) extremism, and 3) freedom and fundamental liberties.[37] A separate study has revealed that overemphasis on the publication of certain events may instil fear and trigger public outcry.[38] This is why the


SATURDAY 27 MAY 2017

THE Star
the people's paper

Nation
Young patriot
Boy's wish to protect nation's image gets PM's backing. >2

Nation
Riding for Malay
The Star and property developer Sunsuria launch cycling event for unity. >10

Malaysian terrorist leader

A total of 46 people have been killed, 31 of them terrorists. A city is under siege, martial law is in place in southern Philippines – and the man behind it is Malaysian lecturer-turned-terrorist Dr Mahmud Ahmad. He and his group are fighting in Marawi to save injured IS leader Isnilon Hapilon. Dr Mahmud is next in line to become the South-East Asian IS cell leader if Isnilon dies. >See reports on Page 3

Holy month starts: Muslims performing terawih prayers at the Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin mosque in Putrajaya. Today is the first day of Ramadan. — MOHD SAHAR MISNI/The Star

Figure 9: The headline of The Star Newspaper published on 27 May 2017.

media should offer diverse perspectives when reporting, as repeating negative themes may provide inaccurate coverage and further inflame tensions within the community.

In conclusion, research by local and international experts supports the argument that problematic media practices may not only influence but amplify negative sentiments among the public, as reflected in online hate speech posted in response to published articles. If the media continues to adopt this particular brand of journalism, it can increase discrimination and heighten intergroup anxiety. This is manifested in many ways, such as through hate speech within public discourse on social media posted in response to certain news reports.

Political leaders and governments alike can be seen to be acting both domestically and internationally with a 'policy of fear.' This remains a political strategy based on the perception of fear and what many have described as wedge politics. In contrast with this strategic politics, a discourse of political inclusion and the internationalisation of human rights is a viable alternative.

Peter Gale

2.3 The Ripple Effect of Hate Speech

Hate speech, a growing concern in today's globalised world extends its influence beyond individuals and the groups they identify with. It can also impact national and foreign policy decisions, as well as strain diplomatic relations. Understanding the repercussions of hate speech in these domains is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate its effects and foster more constructive international engagements.

2.3.1 National Policies

Hate speech can profoundly affect national policies, especially in countries where public sentiment plays a significant role in the political process. Politicians and policymakers may feel pressured to respond to the fears and prejudices stirred up by hate speech, leading to the proposal of discriminatory laws or the reinforcement of existing biases in legal frameworks. For example, hate speech targeting minority groups can result in policies that marginalise these communities, restrict their rights, or limit their access to resources and opportunities.

This can be seen in the case of Donald Trump's political rhetoric, which often emphasised anti-Latino and anti-immigrant sentiment. During Trump's 2016 campaign period, he promised the American public that he would "Make America Great Again" by building a "big, beautiful wall" along the US-Mexican border to curb crime such as illegal migration, as well as the sale and distribution of drugs. He would stigmatise the Latin-American community, especially Mexicans, that they were "not sending their best." After winning the presidential election, he made good on his promise to enforce stricter immigration policies to "enhance public safety."[39] Whilst we can agree that transnational crime is a pressing issue that needs proper enforcement measures to address, the usage of polarising rhetoric may create more problems by singling out an entire community and simplistically attaching negative generalisations to them. This would only increase inter-group tension and encourage hostilities against targeted groups–as reflected in the El Paso shooting committed by a White nationalist, who claimed 22 lives and injured 26 others.

Similar political rhetoric is reported in India which has witnessed tensions between the Hindu majority and Muslim minority. Among the reasons why Muslim minorities are objected to is the perception that they are 'backward' and 'violent,' and their 'illegal' status has compounded the Muslim problem. The process of "othering" Muslim communities has made them feel like an isolated community. Violent crime and riots between the two groups have led to an increase in the number of deaths–particularly amongst Muslims. The statistics are higher in states where a certain political party commands strong support, which indicates the problem may be attributed to the incorporation of hate speech during political campaigns.[40] This is why the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 has drawn great criticism from human rights scholars and activists because it has been perceived to be a reflection of anti-Muslim sentiments which has resulted in a law that is said to discriminate against Muslim minorities, as it does not afford Muslim refugees from neighbouring Muslim-majority countries the same citizenship eligibility as refugees that are Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs.[41]

The current anti-Muslim sentiment in India, particularly amidst the push for the Citizenship Amendment Act is concerning. Such rhetoric seems to negate that Muslims are an important part of the community. Islam is the second-largest religion in India (accounting for 14.2% of the population).[42] The presence of Muslims in Indian history is neither new nor foreign. The spread of Islam in India is said to have been propogated on a large scale after the systematic conquest of Sindh in c. 712 CE by Muhammad ibn Qasim.[43] The Muslim community in the Indian subcontinent not only existed as part of the population but also established a great empire known as the Mughal Empire. This Muslim-led empire ruled the Indian subcontinent for 331 years, from 1526 to 1857.[44]

In addition, one of the Muslim community's most significant contributions to modern Indian history is its cooperation with the Hindu community in the attempt led by Ghandi at the mass, anti-colonial movement for India's Independence from British rule.[45] This is reflected in the Khilafat Movement (1919-1924), which launched a campaign against the British to achieve India's liberation.[46] The Khilafat Movement also received support from Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi, who believed that Hindu-Muslim cooperation was essential for political progress in the struggle against the British.[47] The impact of Gandhi's support helped to end ethnic violence between Hindus and Muslims during that period.[48]

Thus, it is evident that Muslims have played a significant role in the history of India and have since made substantial contributions to the country's development in modern times. Historical experiences show that Hindu-Muslim unity can exist based on a shared nationality, free from the pervasive anti-minority sentiments reported today. Actions that incite hatred against Indian Muslims will lead to ongoing conflict between Hindus and Muslims, perpetuating a cycle of discord and eroding the harmony that once existed between these communities.

Some governments have regretfully employed hate speech as a strategy to rally support by pitting one group against another–and followed up on hateful rhetoric through discriminatory national policies. However, some governments have chosen to take positive measures to protect all groups of people and deal with hate speech, such as hate crime laws or regulations on online platforms. This is also how hate speech can have an impact on national policies. For example, MCMC has released a statement to explain the Government's intention to introduce a regulatory framework for internet messaging service and social media service–which is to address the worrying problem of cybercrime, including online fraud and gambling, sexual crimes against children, and cyberbullying. Although the statement does not specifically mention hate speech, many instances of cyberbullying include elements of hate speech. Thus, the regulatory framework may be applicable.[49]

While these efforts can help curb the spread of harmful rhetoric, they must be carefully designed to avoid infringing on freedom of expression. Striking the right balance between protecting citizens from hate speech and preserving democratic values is a challenge that many nations face. In this regard, MCMC's move to introduce a regulatory framework is not intended to impose arbitrary restrictions on freedom of expression. Rather, it was gazetted to protect internet users and society at large from the many threats of cybercrime.[50] From these examples, we can see that hate speech can influence national policies and underscores the need for a measured, evidence-based approach that addresses the root causes of such rhetoric while safeguarding individual rights.

2.3.2 *Foreign Policy Decisions*

Hate speech can also influence foreign policy decisions, particularly when it shapes public opinion or stirs nationalist sentiments. Leaders may adopt more aggressive and discriminatory stances in response to hate speech, framing their foreign policies around the need to protect national identity or defend against perceived external threats. This can lead to strained relations with other countries, especially those targeted by hate speech or perceived as adversaries.

For instance, hate speech that demonises entire groups of people based on their culture, ethnicity, nationality, and so on can result in trade restrictions, immigration bans, or diplomatic standoffs. One study analysed 40 of Trump's most controversial tweets during his presidential campaign and during the early term of his presidency, which revealed he leveraged the "us vs. them" strategy to pose Muslims as a threatening out-group. Trump later followed through with his rhetoric through Executive Order 13769, which suspended the entry of people into the United States of America from 7 majority-Muslim countries, namely Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, and Syria.[51]

The same can be seen in the case of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Amit Shah, who was also pushing for Citizenship Amendment Act, referred to the Assamese residents of Bangladeshi origin in dehumanising terms when he said, "Should they be thrown out or not? Millions of infiltrators have entered our country and are eating the country like termites. Should we not uproot them?"[52] The statement exhibits sentiments of xenophobia and Islamophobia and was not received well by Bangladesh, whose Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu stated it was an unwanted remark.[53]

Divisive rhetoric can influence foreign policy, as well as harm bilateral relations due to negative perceptions and increased suspicion of one country about another. Specifically, dehumanisation of the 'enemy' fuels a cycle of hostility and retaliation which undermines efforts at diplomacy and conflict resolution. This can disrupt global cooperation on issues like security and human rights, such as the acceptance or rejection of refugees based on perceptions of cultural, religious, or civilisational 'incompatibility.'

As much as one may try to resist a piece of hate propaganda, the effect on one's self-esteem and sense of personal security is devastating. To be hated, despised, and alone is the ultimate fear of all human beings. However irrational racist speech may be, it hits right at the emotional place where we feel the most pain.

Mari Matsuda

3.0 TRENDS OF HATE SPEECH IN MALAYSIA

3.1 Background of Race Relations in Malaysia

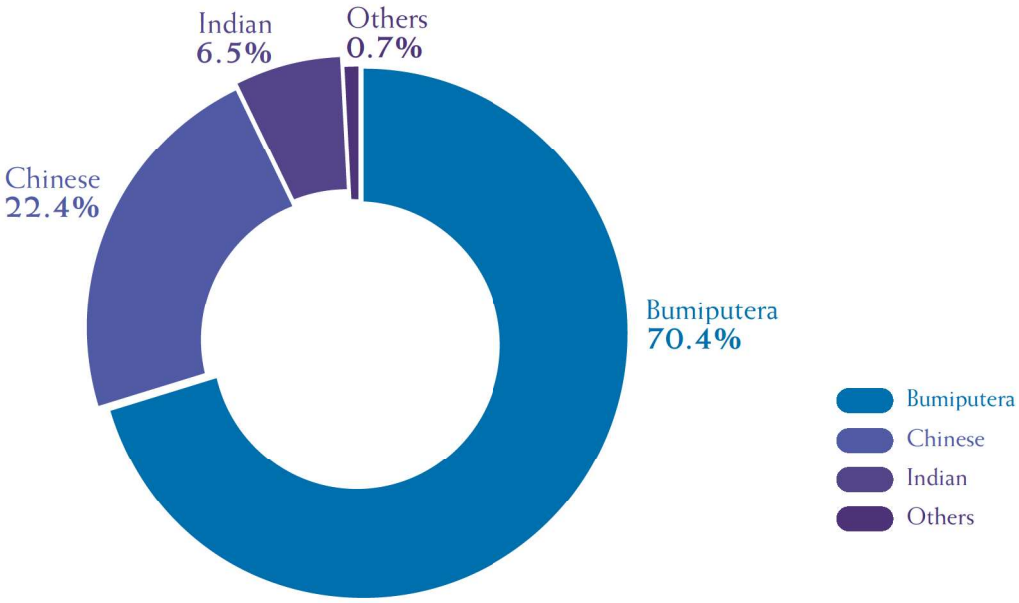

Figure 10: The ethnic demographic of Malaysians.

Malaysia is well known for its multicultural people comprising 70.4% *Bumiputera*,[54] 22.4% Chinese, 6.5% Indians and 0.7% other ethnicities,[55] and this composition is reflected in Figure 10. In any country, it is a challenge to maintain harmonious relations between people of different races and religions. In this regard, Malaysia has done relatively well for its people,[56] and this is supported by Malaysia's current ranking of number 10 in the Global Peace Index 2024,[57] (improving consistently from rankings of previous years as reflected in Figure 11).

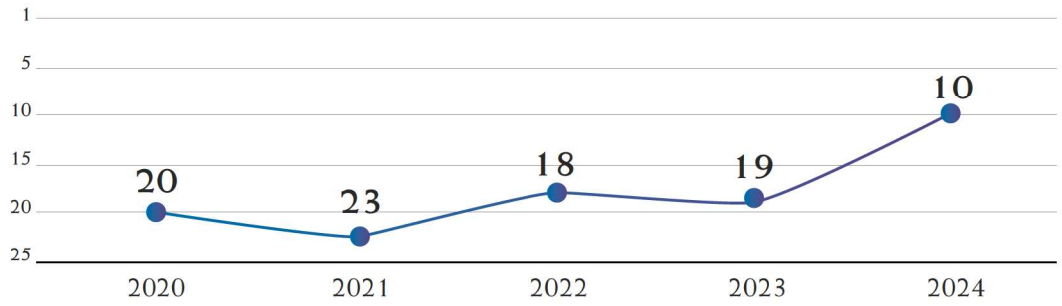

Figure 11: Malaysia's ranking in the Global Peace Index from 2020-2024.

Malaysia has always prioritised peaceful inter-racial and inter-religious relations since the formation of this nation, as felt in the spirit of the Federal Constitution, which tries to acknowledge the uniqueness of Malaysians whilst providing for their rights. In addition, the formulation of various national initiatives aimed to unite the nation by emphasising on common values as the foundation of a shared identity, such as the Rukun Negara (National Principles), the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, Keluarga Malaysia (Malaysian Family), and the principle of Malaysia MADANI, particularly two of the six core values which are *hormat* (respect), as well as *ihsan* (care and compassion).[58]

However, the practical situation in managing inter-racial and inter-religious relations is far from easy due to the social and cultural distance among Malaysians.[59] This contributes to the fear of perceived differences, which sometimes overshadows the many common values shared. This delicate situation needs to be understood by going back to Malaysia's history of colonisation by the British, who strategised policies to facilitate their control over their colonies and avoid an uprising by separating the races.[60] This hindered the formation of unity and Malaysians still bear the marks of colonialism in this regard,[61] as can be seen through the socio-economic gap between races 65 years after Independence.

Pre-existing tensions that existed before Independence in 1957 have continued to the present day. Tensions exist beneath the surface and can sometimes be aggravated and lead to controversial events which leave damaging effects on society.[62] There are many well-documented harms of hate speech, some of which are physical and psychological trauma (stress, emotional outbursts, increased neuroticism)[63] to the individual victims, as well as the disintegration of the social structure within society.[64]

In an interview with the RMP,[65] some of the main perpetrators of hate speech were identified as:

- Politicians
- Media
- Far-left 'liberal' groups
- People under the influence of drugs and alcohol
- People with mental health issues

This situation is made worse when unrestrained expression is facilitated by advancements in technology, and dependence on the internet and its related platforms. As of January 2023, there are 33.03 million internet users with 26.8 million of them active on social media, accounting for 78.5% of the total population.[66] Malaysians rely on online methods of connecting such as through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. The reliance on social media networks has allowed the spread of hate speech to go beyond geographical limitations. In addition, interaction amongst people from different backgrounds and psychologies becomes more commonplace. As a result, people feel less inhibited and restrained in the online world. These factors contribute to conflict in cyberspace,[67] which is exhibited online through hate speech, harassment, and aggression.[68]

The challenges surrounding hate speech become even more critical on social media due to the COVID-19 pandemic which affected the entire world, including Malaysia. According to MacAveney, social media and other means of online communication play a significant role in hate crimes.[69] Research shows that London witnessed incidents of hate speech skyrocket by 900% after the coming of COVID-19, with a surge in hate crimes also being reported.[70] Alshalan et al. have concluded that there is a causal relation between hate speech and actual crime.[71]

To make matters worse, polarising speeches by politicians[72] and news reports in Malaysia have been observed to capitalise on issues which are known to fuel sensitivities. The tone of many articles on racial and religious issues often repeats similar narratives by highlighting dissatisfaction, suspicion, and hatred of one group against the other.[73] The sensationalised way in which certain media outlets report on issues has also contributed to the problem. For example, a qualitative study has identified that when it comes to racial and religious matters, the media have some questionable practices such as clickbait headlines, provocative and unrelated pictures, and stereotypical language. Informants observed that these practices can weaken multi-racial and multi-religious relations.[74]

As a result, it has aggravated pre-existing tensions among the people, which erupts via hate speech and sometimes–acts of violence and extremism. This is reflected in the case of Wanndy, Malaysia's most notorious terrorist recruiter who had radicalised his followers through Telegram conversations through polarising racial and religious speech.[75]

3.2 Dominant Sentiments of Hate Speech in Malaysia: Race & Religion

In the Malaysian context, sensitive matters that touch on racial and religious issues have great potential to divide our society. Controversies of this nature frequently make news headlines, such as the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple riot, which was perceived to have been racially motivated,[76] outcry regarding the initiative to introduce *Jawi* into the national school syllabus,[77] the preacher Zakir Naik's remarks against Malaysian Chinese,[78] a case of deadly road rage in Bangi which became racialised,[79] and many more. It is not surprising that the increased volume of hate speech, particularly online, is related to racial and religious issues.[80] This is supported by research on the categorisation of "flaming" YouTube comments on Malaysian videos, which has identified that racial attacks are the second highest category, whereby netizens would often use words that are insulting, degrading, prejudicial, defamatory, seditious, and threatening.[81]

Due to the propensity of Malaysians that are more reactive to certain issues, a special 3R investigation task force was established on 22 March 2023 by Acryl Sani bin Abdulah Sani, the Inspector-General of Police. Since its establishment, the RMP has received 549 reports in 2023 and 1,456 reports in 2024 related to 3R cases, which is consistent with data from MCMC that these types of incidents are increasing. From the cases reported and investigated, the RMP has identified the main types of offences that involve race and religion, reflected below in Figure 12:[82]

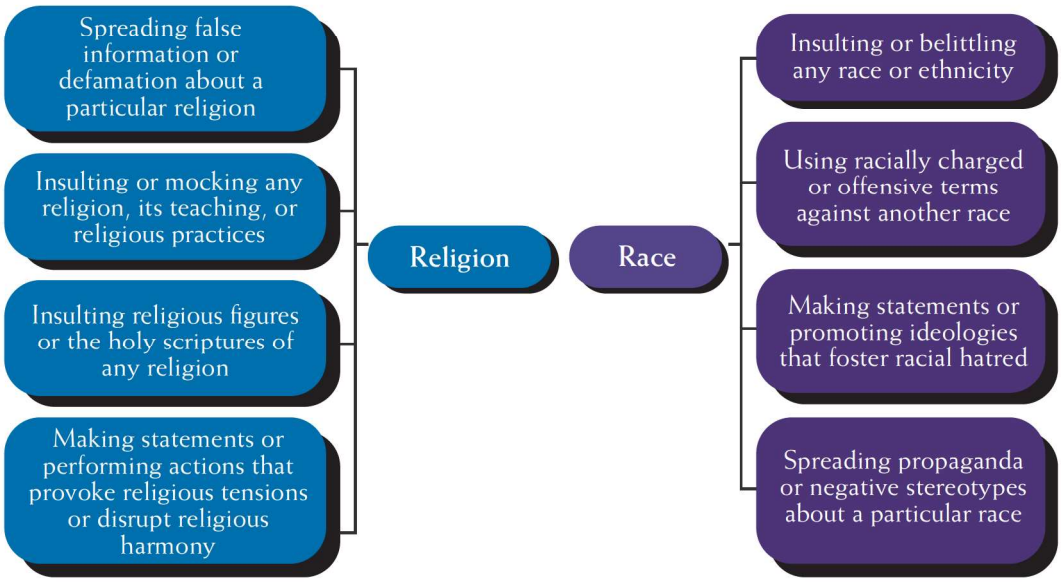

Figure 12: Type of offences involving race and religion.

However, the issue of religion is one of the most provocative. The latest data from the MCMC revealed that in the first three months of 2024, the number of offensive content touching on religion was the highest at 727, followed by racial issues (588).[83] This is corroborated by the findings of a study conducted by The Centre, whereby respondents and informants perceive hate speech of a religious nature to fall under the "very serious" category due to it being highly offensive and/or fear-inducing against the fundamental beliefs of religious adherents. This category of hate speech has a higher potential to cause unrest within society. For example, a Facebook user uploaded a cartoon image depicting the Prophet Muhammad SAW with his wife Aisha RA in a derogatory fashion—attracting approximately 500 complaints to the MCMC.[84]

In another case, Danny Antoni was found guilty of insulting the Prophet Muhamad on social media. The presiding Judge Edmin Paramjothy had explained in his judgement that religion is a matter considered sacred to its adherents. Therefore, the insulting nature of the post is inappropriate, irresponsible, and provocative–which is a clear breach of the limits to free speech as guaranteed under the Federal Constitution.[85]

In March 2024, Malaysians were faced with another sensitive issue when it was discovered that KK Mart had sold some socks which had the *kalimah* Allah on it. The founder of KK Mart and the vendor issued an apology to the public for the mistake in not checking each sock supplied by the factory in China. The parties involved were subsequently charged under Section 298 of the Penal Code for intentionally wounding the religious feelings of others. The *kalimah* Allah is considered sacred for all Muslims and having it printed on socks, which are worn on the feet, was deemed to be very offensive. As such, this incident attracted public condemnation and calls to boycott KK Mart. Unfortunately, several KK Mart outlets were attacked with Molotov cocktails during this period. While it has not been conclusively established that the attacks were in response to the socks controversy, it cannot be ruled out.

The KK Mart incident must be compared to another case, whereby allegations swirled online and went viral regarding allegations that Vern's shoe logo resembled the word Allah in Arabic. Although investigations were carried out, no charges were filed against the company. Experts with backgrounds in theology and Islamic calligraphy expressed that the Vern logo did not resemble the *kalimah* Allah. In addition, Wan Ahmad Fayhsal, Member of Parliament for Machang and the Bersatu Youth Chief wrote a post on X expressing the allegations against the Vern shoe company as "ridiculous" and makes Islam look "petty and bad." He also added that Muslims should not be so paranoid as to think that everything is a challenge to Islam, adding that action should be taken based on knowledge and not blind emotion.[86]

It is important to note that action is also taken against those who engage in hate speech that insults the religious sensitivities of non-Muslims, as well. For example, two men were charged on separate occasions for offensive social media comments that insulted Hindus by referring to their gods as *"syaitan"* or demons.[87] In the case against Zamri Abdul Razak who mocked Hindu gods as "cows,"[88] the judge was reported to have said:

> *The crime of insulting one's religion is committed not only against the person but also against the values and functions that the religion and its followers represent. Religion is something personal and dear to the one professing it.*

Based on the incidents and cases explained, the issues of race and religion are very sensitive in the Malaysian context which have the potential to stir tensions and create conflict in our multicultural society.

3.3 Emerging Trajectories and Trends of Hate Speech in Malaysia

3.3.1 COVID-19

In today's era, hate speech may become a bigger pandemic than COVID-19, as there is no vaccine which can lower the incidences of hate speech from occurring. When the world faced the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in 2019, it was found that the spread of hate speech had increased exponentially. According to a study by a start-up company based in Israel, hate speech has increased by 900% since the COVID-19 epidemic began.[89] According to data from the startup L1ght, most of the hate speech and attacks at that time were directed at China and its people, as well as individuals of Asian origin in other parts of the world. The use of hedge signs such as #Kungflu, #chinesevirus, and #communistvirus was widespread back then.

Research suggests that levels of hate speech increase in response to major events reported by the media–and this is perfectly illustrated through the example of COVID-19.[90] The situation is aggravated when the media employs clickbait headlines, stigmatising language, and discriminatory terms in the publication of news. According to L1ght's report, it is also found that certain media outlets have published news that encourages a negative reaction against Asians.[91] For example, a video published by Sky News Australia titled "China deliberately imposed the coronavirus on the world."[92] The video received over 4k comments; the majority of which used stereotypical/racist remarks and assigned blame to China and their people in general,[93] one of which is reflected in Figure 13 below:

Figure 13: An example of a comment by a YouTube viewer.

Malaysia was also badly affected by hate speech during the pandemic. In an interview with the RMP, it was revealed that COVID-19 was one of the main issues that triggered hate speech. This may be attributed to several factors, such as our reliance on the internet and related applications, as well as the stress Malaysians faced at the time.[94] Malaysia is one of the countries that has the highest internet penetration rate (97.4%) in the Southeast Asian region, with 33.59 million internet users at the start of 2024.[95] Undoubtedly, social media has facilitated the spread of hate speech among social media users.[96] Specifically, there were three main waves of hate speech that hit the country,[97] as seen in Figure 14:

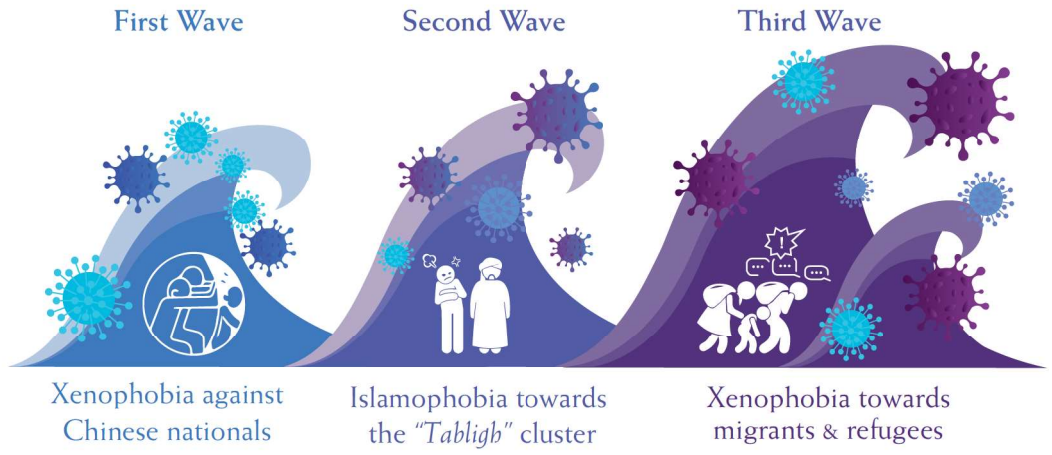

Figure 14: The three waves of hate speech during the height of COVID-19.

The first wave targeted Chinese nationals, as the public blamed them due to the 1st case of COVID-19 being reported in Malaysia involving a Chinese tourist from China. As a result of anxiety about the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, many Malaysians have called for the government to immediately block the entry of Chinese tourists.[98] This can be seen in many Facebook comments that were posted in response to articles that initially reported on the virus which was said to have started in Wuhan, China, as reflected in Figure 15.

Sentiments were posted online by Malaysians of different races, including Facebook users with names that appear to be of Chinese ethnicity. Some of the racist terms posted were "origin of virus", "disaster," "communists," and "*ah-tiongs*" (a derogatory term referring to

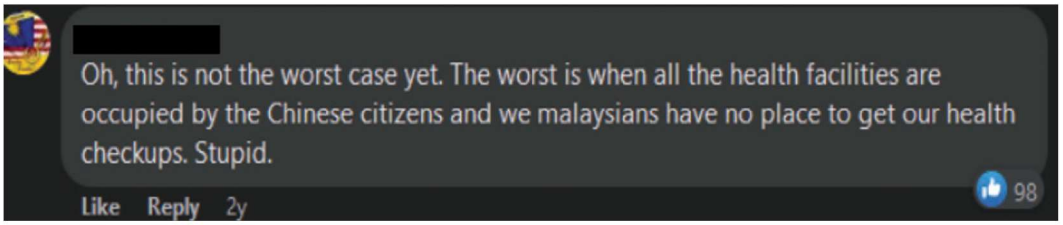

Figure 15: Highlights some of the many hateful comments against Chinese citizens in general during the start of COVID-19.

a person from China). As the virus continued to spread in Malaysia, hatred was expanding to target Chinese Malaysians as well by posting hate speech online which included various offensive words such as "pig" and other obscenities.[99] There was even an online petition urging the government to close the border to Chinese nationals, which reached more than 200,000 supporters.[100]

The second wave of hate speech targeted the *"Tabligh"* cluster due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 suspected to be caused by a large gathering of *Tabligh* pilgrims during the early stages of the epidemic.[101] This gathering was attended by 16,000 people (14,500 Malaysians and 1,500 foreigners). While the event was not prohibited at the time, the subsequent infections which were attributed to the *"Tabligh"* cluster incited anger among Malaysians to the point of using hate speech towards the *Tabligh* congregation in specific, and Malay-Muslims in general. The hate speech directed towards the *Tabligh* congregation and Malay Muslims centred on many themes which included stupidity, irresponsibility, and bad character.[102] At that time, the *Tabligh* cluster had contributed to the highest number of COVID-19 infections in the country during the MCO.[103]

The third wave of hate speech was observed amongst many Malaysians who were 'defending' their security and sovereignty of the country from being infected with COVID-19 by foreign workers and migrants, especially Rohingya refugees. This is an unfortunate development, as many Malaysians were previously sympathetic to the plight of Rohingya refugees. The projection of hatred towards them may have been influenced by fake news spread on WhatsApp and Facebook that the President of the Rohingya Ethnic Human Rights Organization of Myanmar Malaysia (MERHROM), Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani had demanded citizenship and equal rights for the Rohingya community. Although this claim was refuted by Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani,[104] negative perceptions towards migrants and refugees remain unchanged. Years after the fake news circulated, Zafar and his family continue to live in fear due to the intimidation they receive, which includes vandalism of their property and threats made against their lives.[105]

The media's reporting on the Israel-Gaza war matters because it shapes the way the audience views the people involved in the war. It matters because these perceptions – fostered online - can translate into the way people view and treat each other in real life. And it matters because the Palestinians, who are victims of a war, are being systematically dehumanised by large and influential parts of the media to their substantial audiences. When the media is the primary prism through which people understand the war and those within it, it must be held to account.

Susan Carland

3.3.2 *Negative Nationalism*

At present, nationalism is predominantly understood in negative terms. In addition, nationalism is often conflated with patriotism, thus painting patriotism as negative as well. This is unfortunate, as patriotism is imperative in nation-building. What should be emphasised is the concept of just patriotism, which Wan Mohd Nor described as one that is founded on deep and comprehensive knowledge about one's people and nation, based on values of religion and high *akhlaq* that is interpreted accurately and rightfully, and practised with wisdom, consideration, and justice.[106]

However, how nationalism is generally used by political parties may have given rise to extremist views that the rights of one person must be upheld to the detriment of another. For example, this belief forms the basis of many right-wing ideologies in the West which seek to protect their civilisation from violent 'threats' posed by illegal immigrants that have no place in their "civilised" communities.[107]

The discourse is much more serious for the issue of Gaza and Palestine, which has moved beyond themes of 'othering' to reveal dehumanising speech with outright calls for violence against an entire population. In the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), it was observed that high-ranking Israeli officials went well beyond dehumanising statements to employ "vitriolic genocidal rhetoric" to justify the Israeli aggression for the Hamas-led attack on 7 October 2023 by referring to Palestinians in general as "human animals," and "monsters" who deserve it when Israelis "break their backbone" because "an entire nation out there…is responsible."[108]

In Malaysia, the government has consistently shown solidarity for the Palestinians and supported their right to self-determination from the illegal Israeli occupation. Malaysia's 10th Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, referred to as PMX, has been just as vocal as his predecessors in speaking up on the global stage regarding the injustice committed towards Palestinians. Many initiatives were set up to offer humanitarian assistance, and this included bringing back 127 injured Palestinians and their families to Malaysia for medical treatment, which is a crucial right that is being denied to those in Gaza.[109] Despite the love of Malaysians for Palestinians, the millions in donations contributed, and demonstrations attended by tens of thousands of people–negative comments were expressed when the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) brought Palestinians to Malaysia for much-needed medical attention. The negative sentiments, some of which are reflected in Figure 16, reflected themes of negative nationalism, whereby many Malaysians felt the move was unnecessary and wasteful, and equated Palestinians with the Rohingyas.

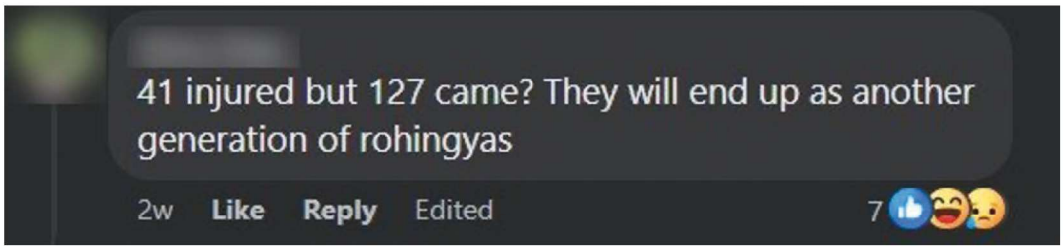

Figure 16: Some of the many negative reactions to Malaysia's initiative in bringing back 127 injured Palestinians and their families to receive urgent medical care.

The same sentiment is also apparent towards refugees in Malaysia, particularly the Rohingyas. For example, a study[110] that analysed social media comments posted by Malaysian readers of The Star Online and Berita Harian in response to articles on refugees during the height of the pandemic exhibited negative nationalism centred on themes of:

- Social and cultural differences
- Criminality
- 'Illegality'
- Threat to health/public safety
- Threat to national security

Figure 17: The negative sentiments of readers about Rohingya refugees, posted in response to a published Berita Harian article.

Some of the sentiments posted by Berita Harian readers in response to articles posted on Rohingya refugees are reflected in Figure 17. Understandably, these concerns exist amongst Malaysians and citizens of many other countries due to the complexities surrounding the arrival of refugees that are perceived to threaten the interests and way of life of local communities. However, the usage of hateful speech–particularly when it incites violence and extremism–cannot be justified.

Dehumanization of the Other - in all its manifestations - is what makes the crime of genocide possible. Yesterday, and today.

Francesca Albanese

3.3.3 *Terrorism and Violent Extremism*

It has been argued that the user-friendly tools and platforms on social media are a conducive environment which encourages the youth towards violent extremism. Terrorists have also refined their recruitment methods, whereby they 'scout' for persons that appear sympathetic to their cause on Facebook and take the grooming process on a more secure platform such as Telegram. There are several factors which make social media appealing to terrorists in recruiting and expanding their influence, among them are (i) the ideal platform for terrorists to conceal their activities and identity; (ii) the ease with which social media allows them to observe other terrorist activities and draw inspiration for their strategies; and (iii) social media's ability to preserve the message and prominence of terrorist leaders even after their demise.[111]

The next stage of radicalisation is more intimate by moving the discourse to WhatsApp or Telegram groups to create a more secure environment that would facilitate the process of radicalisation. In these groups, the discourse that is imbued with extremist ideology is "formed by a combination of elements imported from certain texts and ideologues, with extensive interactions or conversations among members."[112] A study that employed discourse analysis of actual terrorists' conversations revealed that the Administrator of Telegram (AOT) understood the sentiments of his target group very well, leveraged their weaknesses, and manipulated their feelings through the strategic use of language as well as impactful images to form a powerful narrative that successfully influenced the group members towards extremism.[113]

However, extremist discourse is not confined to terrorist groups. Similar themes were observed in the online discourse of netizens, and this is the most evident against migrants and refugees during the height of the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia. Unfortunately, these 'concerns' mutated into more violent expressions by some people. Research has revealed countless online remarks which contain graphic descriptions of violence that were advocated towards migrants and refugees, particularly the Rohingya ethnic group. It was reported that social media users had made threats of physical and sexual violence, including murder against Rohingya activists and their supporters.[114] This includes spitting, shooting, whipping, hanging, and bombing them,[115] and some of these sentiments are highlighted in Figure 18.

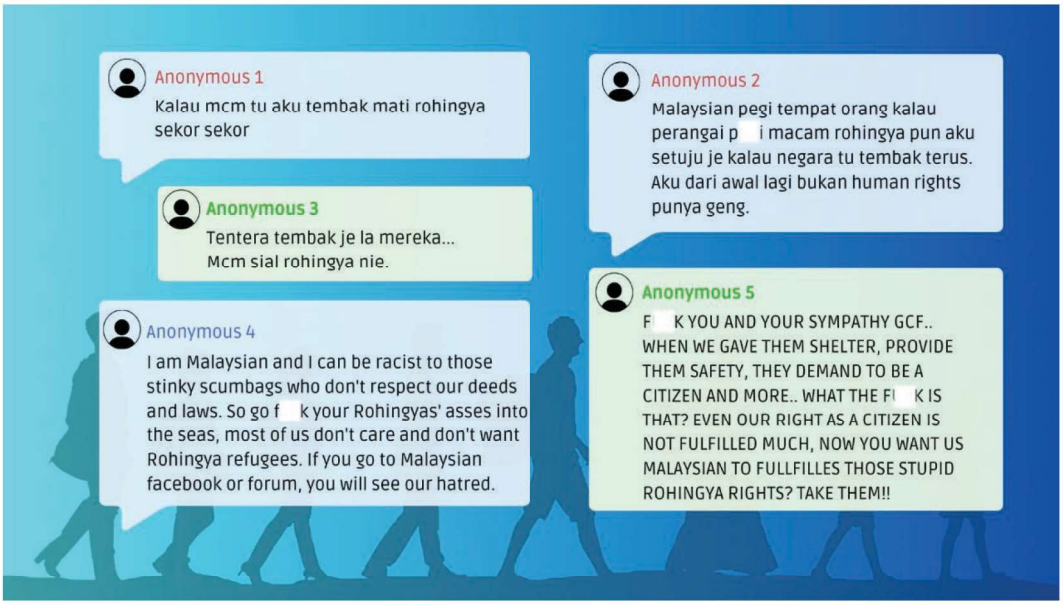

Figure 18: The dominant public sentiments which were amplified during the pandemic, and are reflected in the Facebook comments.

In the most extreme case, calls for genocide against the Rohingya people in Malaysia were seen in many Facebook comments, one of which is translated to mean, "Ethnic cleansing can start." Reflecting on the crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Adama Dieng, Former Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and Gareth Evans, Former Australian Foreign Minister expressed in their letter that:

> *Mass atrocity crimes are often preceded by an incitement to violence through hate speech. Hateful rhetoric has a unique capacity to incite or inspire violence against the targeted group by spreading fear or hatred among its audience.*[110]

The security concern in Malaysia concerning hate speech is nowhere near the threat of committing mass atrocity crimes such as genocide, but Adama Dieng and Gareth Evans' statement highlights the power of hateful narratives, which have the insidious effect of influencing others towards violent extremism. As such, the problem of hate speech must be taken seriously to avoid more serious harm caused by violent extremism and the like.

3.3.4 *Cyberbullying*

In recent years, news reports have highlighted many cases of cyberbullying incidents, which gave rise to the assumption that this is a problem in recent years. However, cyberbullying has been present ever since the widespread use of the Internet and its various applications–especially social media platforms. A study conducted in Malaysia involving 400 youth respondents revealed that males tend to participate in cyberbullying more than females, due to several reasons such as the desire to maintain dominance and gain popularity.[117] In contrast, another study involving a similar number of respondents highlighted that females were slightly more prone to being cyberbullies.[118] These seemingly conflicting findings indicate that the problem of cyberbullying is complex, and not necessarily predominant among males or females.

The MCMC has received a total of 3,199 complaints related to cyberbullying in 2023. It is noteworthy to mention that among those cases, 2,971 (93%) have been addressed and closed.[119] These statistics are an approximation only, as many victims choose not to report these incidents due to fear of repercussions from the perpetrators, as well as the unwillingness to relive the trauma when they report the details of their harrowing experiences. Nevertheless, the statistics related to cases of cyberbullying in Malaysia allow us to see the severity of cyberbullying in Malaysia and the devastating impact of online harassment.

High-profile incidents involving social media influencers have brought the issue to the limelight. For instance, on 5th July 2024, Malaysia was devastated by the news that an influencer, Rajeswary Appahu (or Esha as she was more properly known), had committed suicide due to what is reported to have been caused by cyberbullying–which included obscenities and lewd comments being made, to more serious allegations such as threats to rape and kill her.[120]

There is a perception that the effects of cyberbullying are more serious for the youth, but victimisation is not limited to a particular age group. This can be seen in the case involving a mother of 3 children, 44-year-old Sashikala Nadarajah who allegedly took her

own life after she received a flood of hate comments on her TikTok account regarding, amongst others, her appearance, dancing, and even her handbag collection.[121] If victims feel isolated and do not receive adequate support, some may succumb to the trauma faced through self-harm or even worse, choosing to end their lives.. This is supported by a quantitative study conducted amongst 1,290 adolescents between the ages of 13-17 who experienced cyberbullying victimisation in Peninsular Malaysia were at an increased risk of exhibiting suicidal behaviour.[122] The well-documented impact of cyberbullying is multifaceted and deeply traumatising for all victims, which strengthens the need to improve current intervention methods.

Cyberbullying and hate speech share notable similarities, particularly in their harmful impact and the intent behind their use. The core similarity lies in their capacity to perpetuate hostility and undermine the dignity of their targets through the usage of derogatory, abusive, or inflammatory language. However, it is important to distinguish between the two. Not all instances of hate speech amount to cyberbullying, as hate speech can sometimes occur in isolated or more personal contexts, such as face-to-face interactions. Conversely, not all cyberbullying incidents involve hate speech; cyberbullying may include various forms of harassment, such as impersonation, threats, or doxxing, but does not necessarily involve hateful rhetoric targeting a victim or group based on protected identity factors such as race, religion, nationality, gender, and so on.

Understanding these nuances is crucial for developing effective strategies to address both issues. In this regard, the legal and institutional response to hate speech and cyberbullying play a critical role in shaping the experiences of victims. In Malaysia, there is no specific legislation to address cyberbullying or hate speech, but both acts may be punishable under various sections of different laws. While it is not the intention of the legislature to police the expression of the public and arbitrarily restrict freedom of expression, having no specific laws for cyberbullying and hate speech may result in some issues such as inconsistencies in enforcement. This disparity in legal protections can leave victims feeling vulnerable and without adequate recourse. The legal framework to address these issues will be explained in the next section.

If we are to have a legal system that serves all its citizens, we must take care to discern what is uppermost on the scale of human and societal needs at a given time. This is especially so for values, such as free speech and equality which are sometimes opposed. Otherwise, we may fall into the dangerous trap of succumbing to the loudest voice when, sometimes, it is the softer one that most deserves our attention.

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic

4.0 EXISTING LEGAL FRAMEWORK TO ADDRESS HATE SPEECH

4.1 Historical and Constitutional Position

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right guaranteed to all Malaysians under Article 10(1) of the Federal Constitution. This is in line with Malaysia's international obligation under A.19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which is to protect freedom of expression by reducing government interference in the enjoyment of this democratic right.

Freedom of expression is fiercely guarded because it is considered the foundation of the democratic system. Barendt believed that the most famous and influential one is the theory that free speech is particularly pivotal to maintaining a real democracy.[123] It is difficult to achieve democracy without freedom of speech, for the two concepts go hand in hand. The right to speak without fear and oppression is among the pillars of a free country.

That said, freedom of expression is not absolute, and the enjoyment of liberties without considering the responsibilities attached may result in negative consequences. An example of this is reflected in the disturbing phenomenon of hate speech. This problem is not new, for historical events have shown that genocides have been precipitated by hate speech. The effects have been devastating on social cohesion among global citizens, and Malaysia has not been spared from this problem.

The Malaysian government has long since taken a more conservative route in the enforcement of human rights, and the racial riots of May 13, 1969, contributed to this approach. This dark period of Malaysian history claimed 196 lives, which resulted in The Yang di-Pertuan Agong (YDPA) declaring a state of emergency throughout the country on May 14, 1969. On May 16, 1969, the government established MAGERAN (National Movement Council). The main function of MAGERAN was to restore national security and guarantee the well-being of the people.[124] The Report by MAGERAN which was chaired by Tun Abdul Razak identified that one of the triggers of the tragedy can be traced to speech, taunts, and insults of a hateful nature. Among the provocative, insightful, and hateful expressions stated in the report are "Kuala Lumpur now belongs to the Chinese," "Malays can go back to the village," "Finish off the Malays," and so on.[125]

In addition, MAGERAN temporarily suspended the publication of all newspapers in Malaysia during that time.[126] The move indicates that the government perceived the spread of certain categories of information can provoke racial tension through the usage of hate speech and may cause great danger to the nation. The tragedy of May 13, 1969, had contributed to setting the foundation for how the government would subsequently manage racial and religious relations, including the enforcement of freedom of expression.

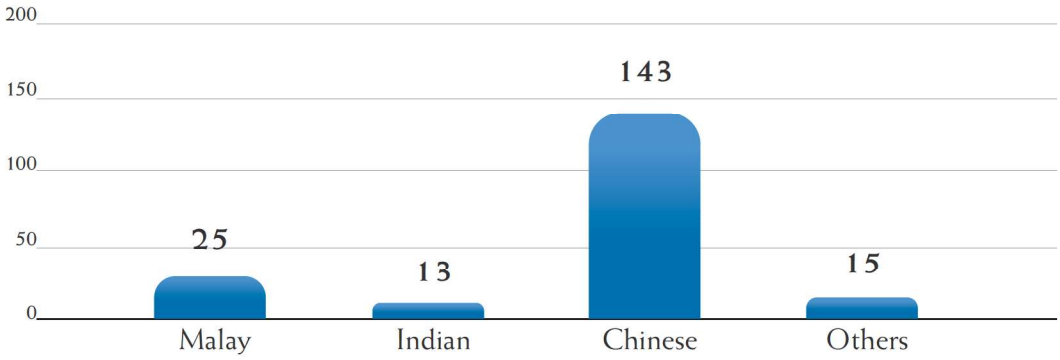

Figure 19: The number of deaths due to the riots of 13 May 1969.

Today, hate speech continues to occur, although there have been no reports of violence that has reached a level of devastation similar to that of 13 May 1969. Hate speech and related incidents are viewed as a threat to public order and national security and have strengthened the government's resolve to regulate freedom of expression to reduce racial and religious tensions. At present, there are approximately 14 federal legislations that may restrict freedom of expression based on different grounds. As mentioned in Chapter 1.0, hate speech has never been defined by Malaysian law. However, there are several provisions within different legislations that may be used to cover offences related to hate speech–but this position results in certain problems, as explained in the next section.

I would want a clear definition of what constitutes hate speech, and what constitutes sedition. There should be a more specific definition. One way to do that is a matter of drafting. Give illustrations. In the Penal Code, illustrations are given. Let's draft through illustrations.

Shad Saleem Faruqi

4.2 Issues with Legal Definitions

There are several problems regarding the definitions of offences that are wide enough to cover issues related to hate speech. However, many of the key terms that appear in these laws are either defined ambiguously, and hate speech is not defined at all. The issues that persist related to definitions of terms related to hate speech may result in many instances of speech that can be cast under the grey area of these laws–some of which may not necessarily need legal intervention and restriction. The table below (Figure 20) highlights some provisions in the Malaysian legal framework which could apply to hate speech:

Source	Definition
A.10(2)(a) of the Federal Constitution	[Restrictions on Freedom of speech, assembly and association] Parliament may by law impose— (a) on the rights conferred by paragraph (a) of Clause (1), such ***restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of the Federation or any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality and restrictions designed to protect the privileges of Parliament or of any Legislative Assembly or to provide against contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to any offence;***
S. 3. (1)A of the Sedition Act	"seditious tendency" is a tendency-- (a) to bring into ***hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against any Ruler or against any Government;***
S.233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act	(1) A person who — (a) by means of any network facilities or network service or applications service knowingly — (i) makes, creates or solicits; and (ii) initiates the transmission of, any comment, request, suggestion or other communication which is ***obscene, indecent, false, menacing or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass*** another person; or (b) initiates a communication using any applications service, whether continuously, repeatedly or otherwise, during which communication may or may not ensue, with or without disclosing his identity and with intent to ***annoy, abuse, threaten or harass*** any person at any number or electronic address,
S.298 of the Penal Code	Whoever, with ***deliberate intention of wounding the religious feelings*** of any person, ***utters any word or makes any sound in the hearing of that person, or makes any gesture in the sight of that person, or places any object in the sight of that person,*** shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year or with fine or with both.

S. 298A of the Penal Code	Whoever by ***words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representations, or by any act, activity or conduct, or by organizing, promoting or arranging, or assisting in organizing, promoting or arranging, any activity, or otherwise in any other manner—*** (a) ***causes, or attempts to cause, or is likely to cause disharmony, disunity, or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill will;*** or (b) ***prejudices, or attempts to prejudice, or is likely to prejudice, the maintenance of harmony or unity,*** on ***grounds of religion, between persons or groups of persons professing the same or different religions,*** shall be punished with imprisonment for a term of not less than two years and not more than five years.
S.7(1) of the Printing Presses and Publications Act	If the Minister is satisfied that ***any publication contains any article, caricature, photograph, report, notes, writing, sound, music, statement or any other thing which is in any manner prejudicial to or likely to be prejudicial to public order, morality, security, or which is likely to alarm public opinion,*** or which is or is ***likely to be contrary to any law or is otherwise prejudicial to or is likely to be prejudicial to public interest or national interest,*** he may in his absolute discretion by order published in the Gazette prohibit, either absolutely or subject to such conditions as may be prescribed, the printing, importation, production, reproduction, publishing, sale, issue, circulation, distribution or possession of that publication and future publications of the publisher concerned.
S. 4A (1) of the Election Offences Act	Any person who, before, during or after an election, directly or indirectly, by himself or by any other person on his behalf, does any act or makes any ***statement with a view or with a tendency to promote feelings of ill-will, discontent or hostility between persons of the same race or different races or of the same class or different classes of the population of Malaysia*** in order to induce any elector or voter to vote or refrain from voting at an election or to procure or endeavour to procure the election of any person shall be liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or to a fine not exceeding ten thousand ringgit or to both such imprisonment and fine.

Figure 20: The provisions under different legislations that could be used to address hate speech.

The Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) is one of the laws most resorted to for online cases of hate speech. It was enacted during the administration of Barisan Nasional (BN), and the subsequent PH and PN governments have used this Act to regulate certain forms of expression which is deemed to be an improper use of network facilities or network service. However, there are many problems with the way key terms are defined. Among the ways "improper" is referred to is when one's communication over any network facility or service is obscene, indecent, false, menacing, or offensive with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten, or harass another person. Interestingly, intent *(knowingly)* is required to be proven under this section, which is something lacking in certain other provisions that may restrict freedom of expression (and hate speech by extension). It is observed that this section is worded this way as a safeguard for free speech, as it limits the application of law to only certain categories of speech if the necessary *mens rea* is proven.

That said, the CMA has certain weaknesses that need to be addressed. The current provision may have the effect of criminalising any expression, even if it is done to merely *annoy* another person. Its application is quite broad and it may allow for abuse of power.[127] The previous Minister of Communications and Multimedia, Gobind Singh Deo, had expressed PH's intention to amend Section 233 of the CMA back in 2018. PH's term that started in 2018 ended abruptly in March 2020 due to the transition in power and composition of members in political parties, thus these amendments were not realised.

Problems of definition are also found in other laws that have been used to restrict hate speech, such as the Sedition Act (SA), Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), and the like. For example, hate speech may be restricted under the SA if it is deemed to be seditious. However, the Act vaguely defines what is meant by sedition–which is any act, speech, words, or publication which has a 'seditious' tendency. This may be construed as *anything* that can be said to produce or have the tendency to produce feelings of ill will, hostility, or hatred. Such a wide, catch-all term should be avoided in the promulgation of laws, as it may open the doors to many different interpretations and cause freedom of expression to be restricted unnecessarily.[128] As such, amendments should be made to improve the present legal framework, starting with clearer definitions of key terms such as hate speech, sedition, and the like.

4.3 Non-specific Laws

Hate speech is a huge concern in Malaysia and has caused anger within the society as reflected in the increasing number of reports regarding offensive incidents every year. Yet, there is still no specific legislation to address the issue. The RMP also agreed with this fact

and explained several related challenges, such as difficulty in taking consistent and stern action. This causes a result of "no further action" being taken and could explain why 9 cases related to hate speech were charged out of 109 investigations from January to August 2024.[129] Previous governments such as BN and PH sought to preserve national harmony by regulating hate speech through different bills,[130] although these bills did not materialise into official legislation. The separate initiatives of both BN and PH highlight the shared belief that hate speech is a serious issue which needs to be addressed.

It is worth the effort if legislators take the task of promulgating *specific legislation* for hate speech considering the seriousness of the problem in Malaysia. This would also allow for the law to explain the level of intention required for different hate speech offences, the evidentiary rules attached, and the various exceptions to different provisions regarding hate speech. Illustrations could also be used to clarify legislative intent, enhance clarity regarding the scope of the law, and the context for its application.[131] In addition, the categorisation of offences should be made according to the circumstances. Fines and punishments should also be meted out according to the severity of the hate speech in question. Aggravating factors such as the offender's level of influence, position of authority, and so on must also be considered, as these circumstances should attract a more serious punishment. That said, not all instances of hate speech warrant a sentence of imprisonment. Providing different categories of hate speech based on the nature and circumstances of different hate speech incidents may greatly reduce instances of arbitrary prosecution, and disproportionate punishments.

The dangers of hate speech increase with the use of social media, as it highlights polarising speech to a wider audience, widens the gap between communities, and causes instability within the nation.[132] Specific hate speech laws can facilitate the problem to be dealt with comprehensively. It would also address weaknesses in current laws, which tend to be overly vague in defining key terms. This helps to prevent the over policing of speech beyond what may be necessary.[133]

4.4 Punitive (Less Emphasis on Rehabilitation and Reconciliation)

That said, overemphasis on laws, especially when they are more punitive, does not solve the problem. In this regard, early intervention methods would prove most useful. We must move towards developing positive aspects of hate speech law and devise mechanisms that would assist in achieving *genuine* racial and religious harmony. More importantly, Malaysia should increase its commitment to combat hate speech by responding with preventive measures and persuasive counterspeech initiatives. Only then, can we hope to address the root of the problem and prevent its occurrence.

No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

Nelson Mandela

5.0 IMPORTANCE OF DIPLOMACY TO ADDRESS HATE SPEECH

Hate speech is a global challenge that threatens social cohesion, peace, and security. It requires a multifaceted approach to address its root causes and mitigate its effects. Diplomacy plays a crucial role in this effort, as it fosters dialogue, builds bridges between communities, and promotes mutual understanding. By referring to some international examples, Malaysian practices, and the Islamic position on hate speech, we can gain valuable insights into how diplomacy can be effectively utilised to counter this growing menace.

5.1 International Examples

According to the "UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech," launched in 2019, the UN reiterated the need for a coordinated response to hate speech, emphasising the importance of diplomacy in building partnerships between member states, civil society, and tech companies. The UN's approach highlights how diplomatic efforts at the international level can shape global norms and foster collective action against hate speech. Around the world, various countries have adopted diplomatic strategies to combat hate speech. These strategies often involve collaboration between governments, international organisations, and civil society to promote tolerance and prevent hate speech from escalating into violence.

One notable example is the European Union's Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online, developed in partnership with major tech companies. This initiative encourages online platforms to remove hate speech promptly while promoting freedom of expression.[134] This approach is collaborative, where governments, companies, and civil society work together to create a safer online environment. This diplomatic effort showcases how dialogue and cooperation between different stakeholders can effectively address hate speech on a global scale.

Another example is New Zealand's response to the Christchurch Mosque attacks in 2019, where 51 people lost their lives in a terrorist attack by a white supremacist. Notably, then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern called the incident for what it was– a terrorist attack and employed diplomatic channels to engage with Muslim communities both domestically and internationally by emphasising on unity and compassion for *all*. Notably, when the New Zealand Parliament sat for the first time following the attacks, the Speaker at that

time, Trevor Mallard, led a procession of leaders from different religions into the House. It is customary that house sittings start with the parliamentary prayer. However, on 19 March 2019, the session began with a prayer recited in Arabic by Imam Nizam ul Haq Thanvi. In an age where Islamophobia is rampant and blinds people with such hatred that it would motivate someone to commit the worst mass shooting in New Zealand, the gesture made in Parliament was very significant as a sign of respect for the victims, their families, and their faith.

Jacinda Ardern's administration was not about a play on semantics and symbolism, but of action. This is reflected in how quickly Parliament responded by introducing laws to increase public safety and better regulate the use of firearms in New Zealand. Among these laws was the Arms (Prohibited Firearms, Magazines and Parts) Amendment Bill. It was introduced to Parliament just over a fortnight after the attacks.[135] On 12 April 2019, less than a month after the Christchurch attack, the bill became law–highlighting how seriously the New Zealand administration viewed the situation and their swiftness in acting.[136]

Beyond laws and policies, Jacinda Ardern also launched the Christchurch Call, an initiative aimed at curbing the spread of harmful content that incites violence and hatred. Most importantly, New Zealand's leadership and diplomatic outreach initiatives included the Muslim communities affected by the tragedy. For example, New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade employed a wide range of responses which included digital diplomacy, reaching almost 10 million people, in seven languages, with more than 3 million views of the Ministry's counterspeech videos.[137] Collectively, the New Zealand government's approach may have helped to heal the nation, whilst setting a global example of how to respond to hate speech and violence with empathy and inclusivity.

That said, the actions of individuals also bear weight. It is worth mentioning the Qur'an burning incidents in Sweden, which angered Muslim communities worldwide. In response to what Muslims perceive as an attack on The Holy Book, Ahmad Alloush, announced his intention to burn the Torah and Bible outside the Israeli embassy in Stockholm. However, he denounced the desecration of *all* holy books and threw down his lighter in a symbolic move to indicate his belief that the holy books of all religions should be protected from such actions. He went on to explain that burning the Qur'an crosses a line in freedom of expression, as the act constitutes a harmful action.[138] His stance highlights the need for limits on free speech when it incites hatred and division. Alloush's actions served as a powerful response to previous Qur'an burnings in Sweden, shifting the narrative towards peaceful resistance and fostering dialogue on respect and coexistence, reinforcing the book's broader message on using diplomacy and communication to counter hate speech and promote mutual respect.

Recently, England witnessed anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant riots that was precipitated by the violent fatal stabbing of three girls on Monday, 29 July 2024 at a Taylor Swift-themed dance class in the seaside town of Southport.[139] Misinformation spread online about the bogus identity of the 'attacker,' Ali Al-Shakati, who was claimed to have entered the country illegally.[140] Soon afterwards, far-right protesters descended on the small town and began to protest violently outside the Southport Islamic Society Mosque.[141] The ostensibly Arab-Muslim sounding name created for this fictional 'attacker' and the immigration status attached to him ignited anger among far-right mobs who threw bricks, slabs of wall, as well as petrol bombs outside the mosque, which had to be protected by a police barricade. Even garbage bins and police vehicles were set on fire.[142] It was later revealed that the real identity of the Southport attacker is Axel Rudakubana, a 17-year-old Christian boy of Rwandan heritage who was born in Cardiff,[143] and not a Muslim boy who came to the country by boat initially perceived.

Despite the official disclosure of the identity of the Southport attacker, violent protests still broke out across the UK in cities and towns such as London, Manchester, Sunderland, and Birmingham based on staunch anti-Islam and anti-immigration sentiment.[144] As a result, many mosques have had to close their doors to worshippers out of fear of unwanted attacks. The Abdullah Quilliam Society mosque, Britain's first mosque was no exception. Adam Kelwick, the imam at the mosque, made headlines for his act of diplomacy in response to angry protesters outside his mosque. Imam Kelwick was not only seen handing out food packs to far-right protesters but also shaking hands and embracing them.[145] He said:

> *I honestly believe....and this is what I've witnessed - that the vast majority of people who have been protesting against Islam, against the Muslim community, I genuinely believe that they are beautiful human beings who were driven after the Southport [incident], by their emotions, mixed together with a lot of toxic narratives they've been seeing in the media and online especially during the election campaign.*[146]

Imam Kelwick's gesture of goodwill struck a positive chord with some of the protesters. Apart from shaking hands and holding each other in a tight embrace, the protesters also remarked that they would love to heed the offer to visit the mosque sometime in the future.[147] Imam Kelwick's actions served as a powerful response to previous Qur'an burnings in Sweden, shifting the narrative towards peaceful resistance and fostering dialogue on respect and coexistence, reinforcing the book's broader message on using diplomacy and communication to counter hate speech and promote mutual respect.

5.2 Malaysian Examples

Malaysia, a multicultural and multi-religious nation, faces unique challenges in addressing hate speech. However, the government has been consistent in using diplomacy to promote social harmony and prevent hate speech from undermining national unity. This can be seen through the Government's effort to unify a country in the aftermath of our nation's worst racial clash. This was not an easy feat, as suspicion and resentment among certain members of Malaysia's inter-racial society lingered even after the tragedy came to an end. The late V.T. Sambanthan was appointed as Malaysia's first Minister of Unity, and his tenure started after the tragedy of May 13, 1969. One of Sambanthan's approaches was to coordinate programmes that aimed to instil unity and understanding amongst Malaysians that focused on two main elements which were the national language, and the Rukun Negara.[148] Sambanthan said,

> *The values and principles enshrined in the Rukun Negara reflect the basis of our national unity and identity, and while they underline the complexities inherent in our multi-racial society, they indicate at the same time our determination to create therefore a viable Malaysian society, in which every Malaysian irrespective of race or creed, can enjoy a sense of belonging and a stake in the country.*

A more recent example is Malaysia's National Unity Blueprint 2021-2030, which aims to strengthen national unity through inclusive policies and programmes. The blueprint emphasises the importance of dialogue and engagement with various ethnic and religious communities, reflecting a diplomatic approach to fostering understanding and tolerance. By promoting dialogue and collaboration, Malaysia seeks to address the root causes of hate speech and create a more cohesive society. This diplomatic approach is further bolstered through the Malaysia MADANI national framework introduced by Anwar Ibrahim. Of the six core values within the MADANI framework, two core values, namely *hormat* (respect) and *ihsan* (care and compassion) respectively, serve to foster tolerance, compassion, and understanding among the Malaysian populace. This framework alongside the National Unity Blueprint 2021-2030, functions together to strengthen social cohesion among Malaysians irrespective of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and religious beliefs.

Putting our national framework into practice, Malaysia has set many examples of how we should respond to hate speech, including Islamophobia. On 15 March 2024, in a statement commemorating the Third Anniversary of the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, Malaysia's Foreign Minister, Hj Mohamad Hj Hasan reaffirmed Malaysia's unwavering

commitment to address Islamophobia and all acts of violence and hatred against persons based on their religions or beliefs. More importantly, the manner in which we respond to hatred has reflected care and consideration of sensitive issues. On 27th February 2023, Malaysia organised the International Forum on Islamophobia: Meaningful Engagement Through MADANI Discourse.[149] This forum, aimed at addressing current instances of Islamophobia, was attended by over 1,000 participants including government civil service, ambassadors and high commissioners, religious leaders, NGOs, and activists. The forum is built upon the core values of the MADANI framework in hopes of fostering the spirit of *Rahmah* (mercy) and *Karamah Insaniah* (respect for human dignity) via the implementation of government policies and programmes. Initiatives such as these showcase Malaysia's efforts of combating hate speech, fostering unity, and presenting itself as a beacon of tolerance.

This is reflected in the actions of former Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs) Zulkifli Mohamad al-Bakri, who expressed disappointment over the offensive caricatures of Prophet Muhammad published by the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. It is important to note that he called upon Muslims not to retaliate to the provocative caricatures through aggressive or violent means, and he quoted the Prophet SAW who said, "'The best among you is the one who doesn't harm others with his tongue and hands." Zulkifli sent an official letter to the French Ambassador dated 27th October 2020 with a copy of a book entitled *"al-Shama'il al-Muhammadiyyah"* (The Sublime Qualities of Muhammad) with the hopes of expelling misconceptions about the Prophet SAW, as well as strengthening ties between Malaysia and France.[150] This is a beautiful and important act to call for peace and understanding for different religious beliefs, whilst condemning acts of violence and extremism, and strengthening ties through shared values.

Another example is the response by the Perak Mufti, Wan Zahidi Wan Teh who urged Muslims to stop the boycott of KK Mart as the action deviated far from the foundation of universal Islamic justice.[151] Datuk Seri Wan Zahidi emphasised how criminal intent, one of the important pillars of Islamic judicial methods in proving one's guilt, was absent in the case of KK Mart, as the management was not aware that the socks sent by the supplier had the *kalimah* Allah printed on them. He added that the act of boycotting a race was also contradictory to the teachings of the Prophet, highlighting that in early Islamic history, only the Quraysh boycotted the Muslims, whilst the Prophet never boycotted anyone, regardless of whether they were the enemy. Though both examples mainly featured Muslim figures, they highlight an approach not particularly defensive, but instead one that acknowledges the perspectives and possible faults of both sides while striving to strengthen the relationship between them as opposed to severing them outright.

An interesting case to consider is the controversial posts which contained AI-generated images of dogs in traditional Malay-Muslim attire such as the *hijab* and *songkok*, enjoying their meals at franchises such as Starbucks and McDonalds, and eating Cadbury chocolates. The AI-generated images are alleged to have been produced by Muslims to shame other Muslims who still chose to buy from these brands despite the latter being declared as some of the popular brands to be boycotted according to Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), which is a nonviolent Palestinian-led movement promoting boycotts, divestments, and economic sanctions against Israel. The images of dogs - which are deemed impure in Islam - in the modest attire of *hijab, baju kurung* and *songkok*, may be construed as hate speech by Muslims against Muslims, attacking their Malay-Muslim identity and insinuating their hypocrisy by not following the BDS movement.[152]

The former Penang Mufti, Wan Salim Wan Mohd. Noor responded to the heated issue through his statement which is translated as:

> *Islam does not allow Muslims to be extreme and taksub even in the name of religion. This behaviour is a result of ignorance as well as close-mindedness of certain groups that cannot give and take with other people, other groups that have differences in opinion and beliefs compared to their own. In today's global world, living together with other citizens of different ethnicities, religions and cultures is a reality that must be acknowledged. This is where understanding and tolerance become very important.*[153]

Wan Salim Wan Mohd. Noor has used wisdom and good speech when he urged Muslims to respect one another's views and be more tolerant and understanding of each other, despite the diverse political opinions. His statements also demonstrate an example of diplomacy in addressing hate speech in Malaysia.

5.3 Examples from the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW

Hate speech, particularly with the usage of social media, has led to an increase in Islamophobia. This results in discrimination and even violent attacks against Muslims and Islam, as can be seen by the vilification of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, numerous Quran-burning incidents and recent riots in Britain. A response made in a moment of rage is a reflection that a person has succumbed to their ego and blameworthy desires. Although it may seem natural to respond to hate with an equal amount of hate, this may make the situation worse and fuel Islamophobes even further.

This does not mean that Islam expects Muslims to be passivists when dealing with people who have transgressed the legitimate boundaries of free speech by inciting hatred. In Islam, we must stand up for what is right. However, the *manner* in which we want to address what is wrong must be right. It is important that we *proportionately* push back against hatred to achieve justice.[154] When we are patient and employ wisdom in our arguments against the naysayers, we may stand to win their hearts and minds more than the futile exercise of fighting fire with fire. In the Qur'an (surah Fussilat verse 34-36), it is explained:

> *Push back evil with what is better and your enemy will become as close an old and valued friend, but no one is granted this save those who show patience, and no one is granted this save one of good fortune. Should a prompting from Satan stir you, seek refuge with God: He is the All-Hearing and the All-Knowing.*

The Prophet SAW received intense opposition from the Quraysh, who employed different methods to derail the Prophet SAW's call to Islam such as ridiculing him, publicly humiliating him by throwing soil on his head, torturing his companions, murdering the believers, carrying out boycotts to starve them, as well as exiled those who survived and continued to follow the Messenger of Allah SWT.[155] Despite the hardships he faced, the Prophet Muhammad SAW responded to hatred without compromising his moral integrity.

One notable example is the Prophet's journey to Ta'if, where he sought their support and protection from the cruelty of the Quraysh in Mecca. There, he was met with more insults when the tribe of Thaqif sent their servants to insult the Prophet SAW and rejected him, as well as the message he brought. He was making his way back to Mecca when the angel Jibril came and offered to destroy the people of Ta'if by crushing them with the weight of two mountains, if that is what the Prophet SAW desired. Instead of wishing punishment to fall upon them, the Prophet SAW prayed for their progeny to one day accept Islam.[156] The Prophet SAW's response to the people who verbally tormented and physically abused him is a lesson to us all on the importance of patience, and responding with what is better–which in this case, is a prayer that they would be rightly guided.

Another example is the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah, a peace agreement between the Prophet and the Muslim community in Medina, and the Quraysh tribe of Mecca. Despite the years of hate speech, hostility, and violence Muslims faced from the Quraysh, the Prophet chose diplomacy and peaceful negotiation over conflict.[157] The treaty, in many ways, was more effective than modern conventions. The treaty included a ceasefire for 10 years–which created a peaceful environment that facilitated the spread of Islam. In addition, the treaty laid the groundwork for the eventual Conquest of Mecca.[158]

Islam has established clear guidelines for us to follow when it comes to addressing injustice– which includes hate speech, Islamophobia, and the like. Therefore, we must reflect on how the Prophet SAW dealt with the trials and tribulations in his life inflicted by the oppressors of Islam. Despite the unspeakable horrors the Prophet SAW and his followers endured, he always exhibited patience, prayed for their salvation, and responded with wisdom which proved successful in softening the hardest of hearts.

Resist the urge to respond to every controversial event that comes to your radar, especially when feeling enraged. There's a time to speak, a time to remain silent, and the wisdom is in knowing when.

Dawud Walid

6.0 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS HATE SPEECH

Hate speech poses a significant challenge in today's interconnected world, where information spreads rapidly and can have profound consequences. To counteract hate speech effectively, a comprehensive communication strategy is essential. This involves gathering facts, understanding the audience, coordinating responses, addressing concerns, and promoting inclusive language. Each of these components plays a critical role in mitigating the impact of hate speech and fostering a more respectful and cohesive society.

6.1 Gathering Facts & Conducting Research

The foundation of any effective communication strategy to address hate speech lies in gathering accurate facts and conducting thorough research. Understanding the context in which hate speech occurs, the specific groups targeted, and the underlying motivation behind such speech is crucial. Research should include an analysis of trends in hate speech, the platforms where it is most prevalent, and the legal and societal frameworks surrounding the issue. This data-driven approach enables a more precise and effective response, ensuring that efforts to counter hate speech are based on evidence rather than assumptions.

6.2 Understanding the Audience and Assessing Public Impact

Once the facts are established, it is essential to understand the audience. This involves identifying the general public's perception of the issue, the possible various interpretations, and the potential impact on various communities. Audience analysis helps tailor communication strategies to different demographics, ensuring that messages resonate with the intended recipients, as well as avoid creating and/or compounding the problem.

For example, an NGO released an infographic (Figure 20) which summarised the donations they collected from the public and what it has been used for to be transparent.

Figure 21: Infographic released by an NGO which was misunderstood by the public, inciting their anger regarding expenses for the "Projek Tudung".

However, the NGO named one expenditure as "Projek Tudung" (translated as the *Hijab* Project) which cost RM280,000 and this information incited anger amongst many Malaysians–even attracting certain racist and Islamophobic remarks for what was perceived as an exorbitant expenditure for an 'unnecessary' garment, some of which are highlighted in Figure 22.

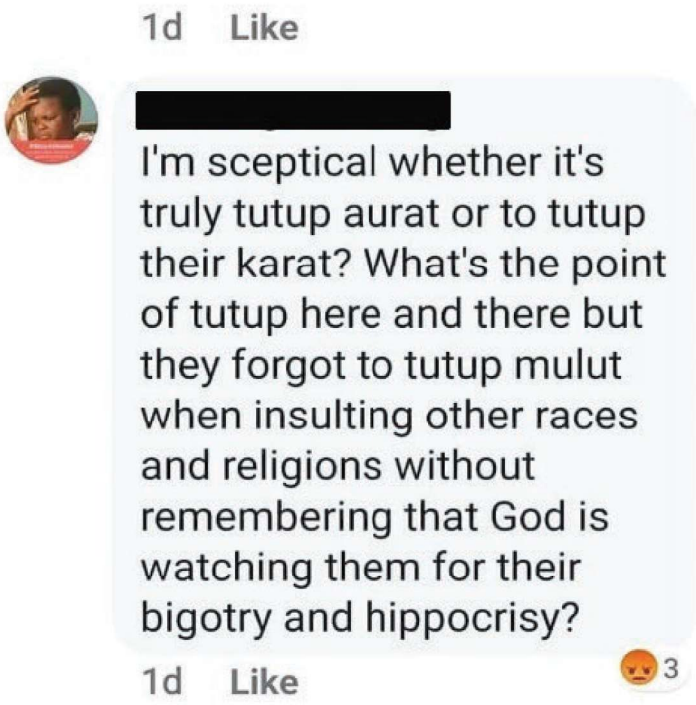

Figure 22: Some harsh comments regarding the misunderstanding surrounding the purpose of the "Projek Tudung".

Dr Malar Santhi Santherasegapan, a medical doctor and frontliner during the pandemic, felt compelled to explain that the "Projek Tudung" was not the typical *hijab* that Muslim women wear but referred to the disposable head and neck covering worn by frontliners, regardless of gender or religious belief, as part of the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to protect themselves. She explained further that she is a Hindu yet wore the *hijab* as part of her PPE and called upon the public to reflect on their racist statements. In this case, perhaps the information shared on the infographics could have been filtered to ensure it was presented more accurately to avoid misunderstanding and unnecessary tensions within the community. Dr Malar's simple, direct message to correct the public's misconception and discourage racist speech is an example of effective communication that resonated with the people and helped to address the problem.

As such, it is important to assess public impact by understanding how an issue may be perceived by the people. How we communicate greatly influences societal behaviour, public opinion, and intergroup relations. By grasping these dynamics, we can develop targeted interventions that are inclusive, prevent conflict, and mitigate tension in society.

6.3 Coordinating Responses & Following a Clear Communication Plan

Coordinating responses is vital to maintaining a unified and consistent message against hate speech. This requires collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organisations, community leaders, and media outlets. A clear communication plan should outline the steps to be taken in response to hate speech incidents, including who will speak on behalf of the organisation, the key messages to be conveyed, and the platforms to be used. Consistency is key in preventing mixed messages, which can weaken the overall response. Additionally, having a predefined plan allows for swift action, which is crucial in minimising the damage caused by hate speech.

6.4 Address Problems and Assure the Public

In addressing hate speech, it is important to directly confront the issues at hand while also reassuring the public. This involves acknowledging the harm caused by hate speech, offering support to affected communities, and providing clear information on the steps being taken to address the problem. Transparency is essential in building trust, as the public needs to see that their concerns are being taken seriously. Communicators should also emphasise the positive actions being taken to counter hate speech, such as educational initiatives, legal measures, and community-building efforts. By addressing the problem head-on and assuring the public that solutions are being implemented, communicators can help reduce fear and promote social cohesion.

6.5 Inclusive Language

Inclusive language is a powerful tool in the fight against hate speech. It involves using words and phrases that promote respect, understanding, and unity, rather than division. Inclusive language acknowledges the diversity of the audience and seeks to represent all groups fairly. By adopting inclusive language, communicators can model the behaviour they wish to see in society and challenge the norms that allow hate speech to flourish. Moreover, inclusive language can help defuse tensions, foster dialogue, and create a more welcoming environment for marginalised communities. It signals that everyone is valued and that hateful rhetoric has no place in public discourse.

Addressing hate speech requires a multifaceted approach that combines research, audience understanding, coordinated responses, public reassurance, and inclusive language. By implementing these strategies, communicators can more effectively counteract hate speech, promote social harmony, and protect the dignity of all individuals. The role of communication in this effort cannot be overstated, as it shapes the narratives that influence public perception and behaviour. Ultimately, a well-crafted communication strategy can help turn the tide against hate speech and contribute to a more just and inclusive society, and this is summarised in Figure 23:

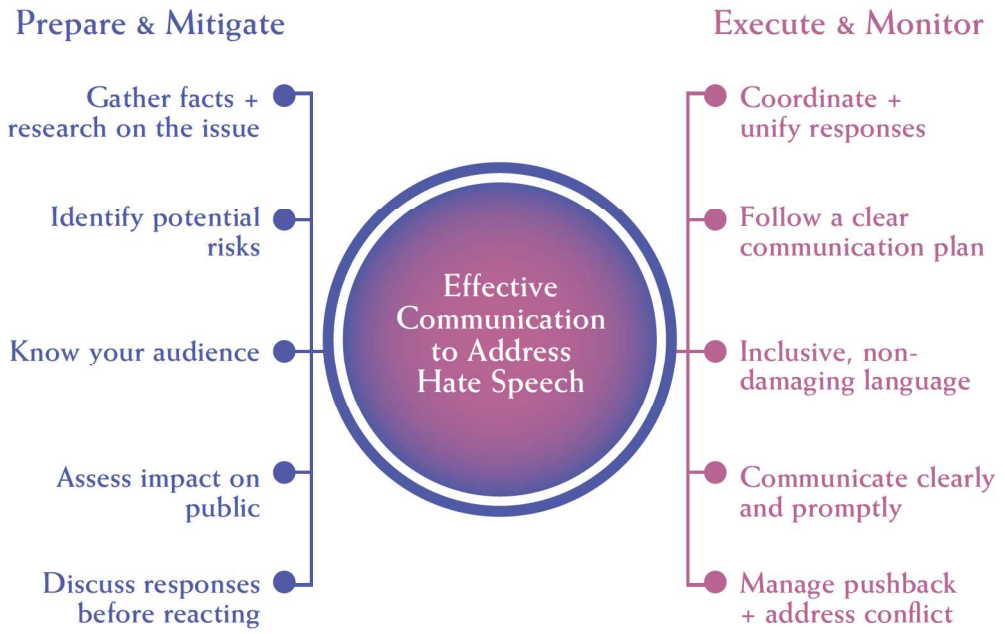

Figure 23: The communication plan when addressing hate speech.

As we look at civil war in other countries, we should be proud of the heritage we own: that instead of the conflict between groups of the same faith, we—of different races and different faiths—have managed to live side by side peacefully. Let's not take this peace for granted. Let's not destroy it by encouraging an atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia.

Her Majesty Raja Zarith Sofiah, Queen of Malaysia

7.0 WAY FORWARD: A WHOLE-OF-NATION APPROACH

The observations and trends are indications of how hateful sentiments have manifested and evolved in recent years. In the Malaysian context, hate speech with racial or 'religious' undertones seems to be more dominant. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought heightened levels of xenophobia among certain segments of Malaysians against other nationals, particularly vulnerable groups such as migrants and refugees. This suggests feelings of animosity can develop and become intensified in response to certain events, especially when aggravated by polarising discourse.

At the international level, many organisations have taken preventive measures to tackle the problem. The UN recognises the danger of hate speech which has been a catalyst to more serious crimes such as violence and even genocide. As such, the Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech was launched to address hate speech at a national and international level.[159] The Council of Europe has adopted the Recommendation on Combating Hate Speech respectively to meet similar objectives.[160]

Malaysia has made notable efforts to prevent hate speech and violent extremism which should be acknowledged, supported, and continued, such as the SEARCCT's many programmes aimed at promoting inclusivity and preventing radicalisation in society and among the youth, such as the University Lecture series which has received participation from approximately 9,000 university students from across Malaysia. SEARCCT also actively publishes content that aims to counter extremist negatives, and literacy modules that attempt to increase awareness regarding the harms of racism, hate speech, discrimination, and many more. Most recently, SEARCCT has collaborated with UNDP, the Ministry of Education (MOE), and the RMP to head a joint project, entitled "Leveraging Educators Against Radical Narratives" (LEARN). This project is significant due to the wide-scale collaboration with different stakeholders and would empower counselling teachers, education influencers, and school liaison police officers to identify early symptoms of radicalisation among students, promote positive change through social media, and implement initiatives to prevent violent extremism in schools. More recently, the Malaysia Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism was launched—which solidifies the Government's commitment to this cause.

That said, the Government cannot work in silos, as initiatives, regardless of their excellence in their design, planning and execution, may fall short of reaching all members of society due to several limitations such as suspicions of Government-led initiatives, the

language the programmes are conducted in, the relatability of the content, and so on. These limitations may become obstacles to the long-term success of policies—which necessitates a whole-of-nation approach.

A whole-of-nation approach has been explained as "the approach to bring about the constellation of government, private sector, and NGO agencies to achieve a set vision articulated by the state."[161] The author feels that adopting this approach is timely because it brings together all of society *with* the Government for a more widespread, effective collaboration. This multi-stakeholder framework would likely result in more successful implementation of programmes, as it has a higher chance of being supported by the academia, the private sector, civil society, and grassroots organisations, as well as the people due to initiatives being more relevant to the situation on the ground.[162] In addition, the whole-of-nation approach results in the sharing of responsibility among various stakeholders. When the entire nation comes together in the implementation of intervention methods that are thoughtfully designed to reflect the concerns of the people, problems can be better addressed.

For example, members of the academia play an integral role in a whole-of-nation approach by bridging the gap between different groups and discouraging racism. Efforts have been made to ensure that research findings on hate speech and related issues are translated tangibly for the public beyond the publication of reports and academic journals. For example, the children's book *"When Love Heals Hate"* was published to educate children on the harms of bullying others for their religious beliefs. The book is a resource that assists caregivers and educators in having difficult but important conversations about hate speech, racism, and discrimination.[163]

In addition, Civic Society Organisations (CSOs) have come up with different intervention methods and educational initiatives that are accessible to different members of the Malaysian public. For example, Architects of Diversity (AOD) is one of the leading organisations for diversity and inclusion education in Malaysia and has introduced many meaningful programmes such as Sekolah Diversiti, the Interfaith Youth Alliance, workshops for youth ambassadors of unity, and many more.[164]

However, greater strides in improvement can be made if we tailor our efforts to be relatable to the different demographics of Malaysians, make our programmes and materials widely accessible, are consistent with executing preventive measures, and monitor its evaluation for improvement. This cannot be done without a whole-of-nation approach that is relatable and relevant to the situation on the ground. When this is done, initiatives to prevent hate speech have a higher chance of being accepted by the wider public. The recommendations for a whole-of-nation approach to address hate speech are explained in the following section.

Recompense injury with justice, and recompense kindness with kindness.

Confucius

7.1 Justice as the Purpose of Human Rights

The discourse of human rights often centres on the scope of rights–what it means, what it applies to, what are the limitations and so on. Unfortunately, the purpose of human rights (and freedom of expression by extension) is not emphasised enough. The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that the inalienable rights of all humans are the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace. However, it does not describe what freedom and justice *mean*. Syed Naquib Al-Attas describes it as:

> *Freedom is to act as one's real and true nature demands—that is, as one's haqq and one's fihrah demands—and so only the exercise of that choice which is of what is good can properly be called a 'free choice.' A choice for the better is therefore an act of freedom, and it is also an act of justice ('adl) done to oneself.*[165]

From this, we can surmise that true and meaningful freedom is the act of doing good deeds and achieving justice. Justice can only be carried out when knowledge and action is used to put things in their proper place, to achieve a harmonious balance.[166] Such is the fundamental principle that should be used in our conception of human rights.

In the context and application of freedom of expression, we must consider what the negative implications are when we exceed the limits of our freedom and transgress the rights of other people. Al-Ghazali elaborated on the harms of excessive speech. If hate speech has the effect of causing discontent and disunity, as well as sowing the seeds of hate in the minds of the people, then it is not the type of speech which should be protected.[167] As such, freedom of expression must take into consideration our duty to be responsible, and must always bear in mind the purpose of freedom we seek to uphold–which is to achieve justice.

The same is true when we respond to hate speech. We must ensure that our counterspeech is not imbued with the same kind of hostile message that we seek to address–for doing so will only cause more problems. When we develop a careful and considerate attitude in our application of rights, we may see a vast improvement in how we communicate with others that results in justice for people of all ethnicities, nationalities, and religious adherents.

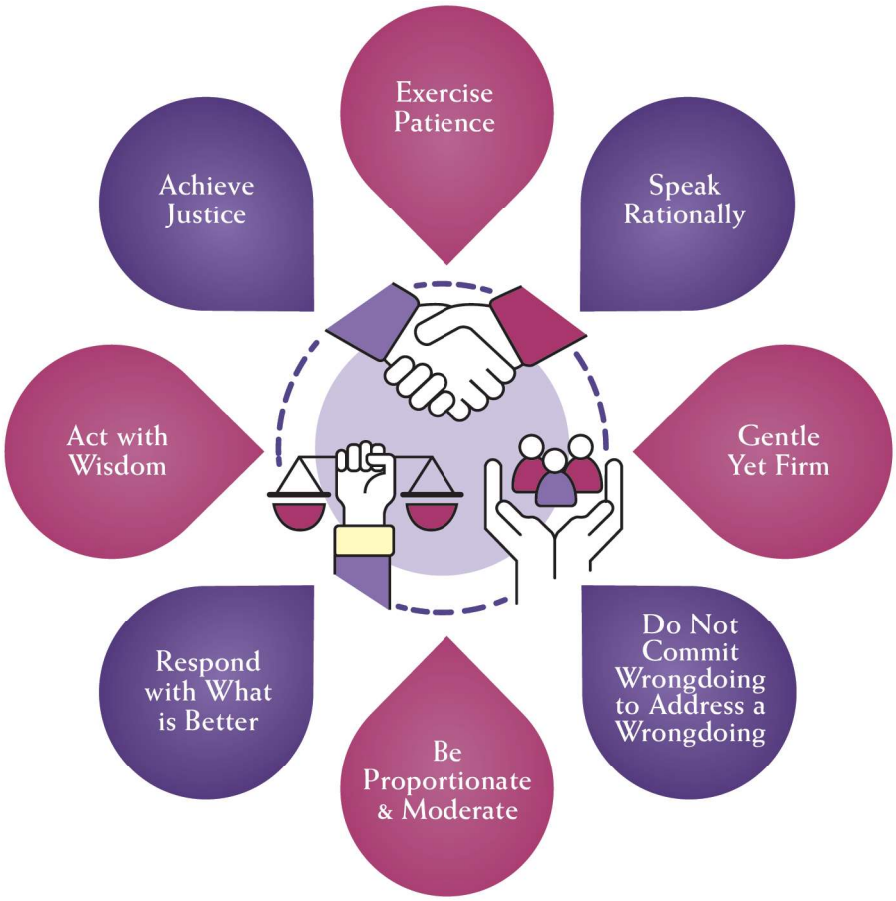

Figure 24: A guideline when responding to hate speech.

7.2 Strengthening National & Legal Frameworks

There is a great need to address weaknesses in the current legal framework to manage hate speech. This is because some of the laws today are rather vague and general that they may result in unjust restrictions on free speech. This is why a specific law on hate speech is important–not to be more restrictive, but to provide a comprehensive, clear legal guideline that could deter arbitrary persecution.

Contrary to popular belief, having a specific law to regulate hate speech is not meant to be more restrictive of speech, because it is dangerous if *all* types of offensive speech are made punishable under the law. Rather, it should aim to provide a higher standard as to what falls under hate speech to avoid abuse of process. The lawmaking process must also factor in widespread consultation with experts from various backgrounds, affiliations, and

organisations–including victims of hate speech. In addition, hate speech laws should also be enacted with the aim of rehabilitation instead of merely punitive measures. This may help prevent future instances of hate speech instead of relying on the repeated enforcement of laws and the threat of punishment to mitigate the damage caused to society.

7.3 Support for Research and Capacity Building

There is a dire urgency to shift from the current national strategy that emphasises a punitive approach to a softer approach of offering positive counterspeech initiatives. In doing so, we can respond better to dangers posed by hate speech and reduce its adverse effects by diffusing hatred with persuasive messages and programmes which promote tolerance, respect, and unity within the diversity of the Malaysian community.

An imperative step in strategising efforts to combat hate speech is understanding the situation. More research needs to be commissioned to gain insight into the problem. This is to form a deeper understanding of what drives hateful sentiments in the Malaysian context, how it is projected, and the impact it leaves on the targeted individuals/groups and society. Support must also be given to capacity-building programmes, as this is an investment that will increase understanding and improve overall interaction with people across different socio-economic, racial, and religious groups.

7.4 Counterspeech Initiatives

In Malaysia, there are notable efforts to prevent hate speech, but more can be done to come up with early intervention methods. This can encourage an environment for positive multiracial and multireligious relations. Counterspeech initiatives should be aimed at *all stakeholders*, as this may encourage wider acceptance by the public. The government must increase their engagement by conducting and supporting programmes at different levels, particularly with civil society organisations to ensure that counterspeech initiatives are in touch with the situation on the ground.

Recently, a digital content creator named Andrew posted a video of him accidentally reciting parts of the *azan*, which he had memorised because he stays near a mosque. His video reflected the spirit of *muhibbah*, as he is a non-Muslim that could appreciate (and even memorise) the *azan*. The comments posted in response to this video are heartwarmingly positive, with many non-Muslims reflecting on how the *azan* reminds them of what time it is. As of August, his video has received 215,000 likes, 3,512 comments, and 91,000

shares on Instagram, demonstrating the reach of his content. Videos like this reflect the effectiveness of counterspeech videos, which can be a means of uniting Malaysians and strengthening social cohesion.

Thought and consideration must go into planning each initiative to increase the likelihood of the message being accepted by a larger audience. Programmes, campaigns, and content such as videos and reading materials should be done in the national language of Bahasa Melayu and translated into local languages used by the other major races in Malaysia. At present, many initiatives are focused on urbanites residing in major cities such as within the Klang Valley. This becomes a significant hindrance in increasing awareness of anti-racism and anti-hate speech across different segments of the Malaysian people. As such, effort must be made so that counterspeech initiatives are localised, suitable for, and relatable to those from various socio-economic groups, and appropriate for different ages.

Figure 25: Some of the positive comments posted in response to Andrew's video.

Sports, cultural, and arts programmes need to be revived and emphasised. Studies indicate that multicultural relations improve significantly after increased interaction with people from diverse backgrounds and experiences in such programmes.[168] Genuine dialogue is another way in which the government can identify the different concerns of society and the different ways in which hate speech may affect their communities. When these various efforts are conducted, it would better inform the legislators and policymakers in shaping dynamic responses to a complicated problem.

Figure 26: Summary of focus areas to address hate speech.

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In *From Hate to Hope: A Holistic Approach to Address Hate Speech*, the author explores hate speech's pervasive and damaging effects in today's increasingly polarised world. This work offers an insightful analysis of hate speech and its adverse impact on people, as well as nations, by referring to various sources where hate speech is prominent, such as political communication, news outlets, and social media.

The book also delves into the Malaysian experience with hate speech, highlighting the complex intersections of race, religion, and nationalism. Through a critical look at emerging trends such as the rise of hate speech during the COVID-19 pandemic, violent extremism, and cyberbullying, the author provides a clear picture of the current landscape and its evolving threats.

Recognising the limitations of punitive measures, *From Hate to Hope* emphasises the importance of diplomacy, effective communication strategies, and, above all, the power of counterspeech initiatives. This book also offers a diplomatic framework for addressing hate speech by drawing on international examples and historical lessons.

The author advocates for a holistic, whole-of-nation approach—one that involves coordinated efforts from the Government in collaboration with members of the academia, media, civil society, and everyday citizens. With a focus on strengthening social cohesion, promoting inclusive language, and supporting counterspeech initiatives, the book outlines actionable steps to create a future where hate is replaced with hope, and division is replaced with unity.

From Hate to Hope is both a timely and crucial contribution to global discussions on hate speech and offers practical solutions to foster understanding and harmony in a rapidly changing world.

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