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# Islamophobia Among Malaysian non-Muslim Indian Undergraduate Students: A Focus group Study

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## Islamophobia Among Malaysian non-Muslim Indian Undergraduate Students: A Focus group Study

Islamofobia di antara Mahasiswa India *Non-Muslim* Malaysia: Studi Kelompok Fokus

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### ABSTRACT

Malaysia is often regarded as a multi-ethnic nation that inherited a few ethnic groups who were taken as homogeneous unions. Still, the rise of Islamophobia in Western countries has increased the same sentiment among Malaysian non-Muslim Indians, with the HINDRAF protest in 2007 demonstrating their deep concern for religious freedom. This study aims to understand the formation of Islamophobia among Malaysian non-Muslim Indians and their perceptions of Islam. This study employed the focus group method to collect data, thematic analysis to analyze data and purposive sampling to recruit 16 non-Muslim Indian undergraduate students. Intergroup contact theory was used as a framework to understand the mechanism for the formation of Islamophobia. Results showed that although participants from public universities have more contact with Muslim classmates than those from private universities, their knowledge and perception of Islam, as well as the levels of their Islamophobia are quite the same. The results suggest that it is important not only to increase contact between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia but also to increase knowledge of each other's cultures and religions, because increasing contact without knowledge will only further strengthen the existing prejudice. Through increasing contact and knowledge of both Muslims and non-Muslims, it is believed that the Islamophobia among non-Muslims would be reduced, thus increasing harmony among different ethnic groups.

### ABSTRAK

Malaysia sering dianggap sebagai negara multi-etnik yang mewarisi beberapa kelompok etnik yang dianggap sebagai kesatuan homogen. Namun, isu kebangkitan Islamofobia di negara Barat telah meningkatkan Islamofobia di kalangan masyarakat India non-Muslim di Malaysia. Protes HINDRAF pada tahun 2007 menunjukkan keprihatinan mendalam mereka terhadap kebebasan beragama. Studi ini bertujuan untuk memahami pembentukan Islamofobia di kalangan orang India non-Muslim Malaysia dan persepsi mereka terhadap Islam. Studi menggunakan metode kelompok fokus untuk mengumpulkan data, analisis tematik digunakan untuk menganalisis data, dan sebanyak 16 mahasiswa sarjana India non-Muslim dikumpulkan menggunakan teknik *purposive sampling*. Teori kontak antara-kelompok digunakan sebagai kerangka untuk memahami mekanisme pembentukan Islamofobia. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun partisipan dari universitas awam lebih banyak melakukan kontak dengan teman sekelas yang Muslim daripada universitas swasta, pengetahuan dan persepsi mereka tentang Islam, serta tingkat Islamofobia mereka cukup sama. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penting tidak hanya meningkatkan kontak antara Muslim dan non-Muslim di Malaysia tetapi juga penting untuk meningkatkan pengetahuan tentang budaya dan agama masing-masing, karena peningkatan kontak tanpa pengetahuan hanya akan semakin memperkuat prasangka yang ada. Melalui peningkatan kontak dan pengetahuan baik pada Muslim dan non-Muslim, diyakini bahwa Islamofobia pada kalangan non-Muslim akan berkurang, sehingga meningkatkan kerukunan antara kelompok-kelompok etnik yang berbeda.

### Original Article

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## 1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-cultural society comprising 69.6% Bumiputra (Malays and other indigenous people), 22.6% Chinese, and 6.8% Indian (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). In terms of religion, 61.3% subscribe to Islam, 19.8% to Buddhism, 9.2% to Christianity, and 6.3% to Hinduism (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015). Therefore, there is a need for the Malaysian government to create a society where Malaysians with different religions can live in harmony and peace. However, the rise of Islamophobia in Western countries may also threaten harmony and peace in Malaysia. Thus, information about the formation of Islamophobia and perceptions toward Islam among Malaysian non-Muslims is necessary to plan and implement strategies to prevent the extension of Islamophobia among non-Muslims in the country. In this study, we targeted Malaysian non-Muslim Indians. The focus group discussion method was used to collect data, purposive sampling was employed to select participants, and the thematic method was used to analyze the data. Using intergroup contact theory as a framework, we aimed to identify the factors relevant to the formation of Islamophobia and perceptions of Islam among Malaysian non-Muslim Indians.

Islamophobia is a feeling of fear or hatred of Muslims and Islam (Zick et al., 2011). The term “Islamophobia” was already used in the early 14 century when immigrants from Muslim countries began settling in Europe (Zick et al., 2011). Since then, the term has been used to describe the anti-Muslim feelings of some Christian populations in Europe. Similarly, Bazian (2018) suggested that Islamophobia has been known since the early-period development of Islam, and that the term refers to the practice of non-Muslims to discriminate against Muslims by separating them from economic, social, and community life.

Some relatively recent attacks have strengthened Islamophobia in Western countries, including the murder incident of over 120 people in Paris, the World Trade Centre attack in New York on September 11, 2001, the bombing in Madrid on March 11, 2004 and the bombing in London on July 7, 2005 (Allen, 2010). The prevalence of Islamophobia in Western countries has also been reported in some studies. For example, a survey among eight European countries estimated that about 27%–62% of those living in these countries have the perception that there are too many Muslims in their countries, and more than half perceived Islam as a religion of intolerance (Zick et al., 2011). Nonetheless, as most of these studies are conducted in Western countries, where Muslims are a minority, it is not clear whether these findings can be generated and applied to non-Western nations (Massoumi et al., 2017), such as Malaysia, where Muslims comprise the majority.

In Malaysia, Islam is the largest religion (61.3%), followed by Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%) and Hinduism (6.3%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015). Although Islam is the official religion of Malaysia and the sultans are the heads of religion in their respective states, Malaysia is not officially an Islamic nation according to the 1957 Constitution of Independence; in fact, the freedom to profess, practice, and propagate individual faiths are granted under Article 11(1) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution (Yousif, 2004). However, the increasing intersection of Islam and politics, which has been consistently enhanced by prime ministers to sustain electoral support within the Malay community has raised the concern of non-Muslims regarding the process of Islamization process. These concerns include issues on how far the Islamization process will go, whether Islamic religious law will affect non-Muslim, whether their religious freedom and the democratic system of the government will be affected, and, whether Malaysia will ultimately be an Islamic country. In addition, some events reported in news media further strengthened these concerns, including restrictions on building new non-Muslim religious buildings and cemeteries, the printing of Bibles in Bahasa Malaysia, the use of Arabic-derived Malay words, and the increasing introduction of Islamic content into compulsory subjects, even while non-Islamic religions are neglected (Hamayotsu, 2015; Lau, 2018; Yousif, 2004).

Incidents involving the demolition of Hindu temples have also increased concerns about their freedom of religion, paving the way for heightened Islamophobia among Malaysian non-Muslim Indians. The majority of Malaysian Indians are of South Indian origin and include Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Sri Lankans. Most of them migrated to Malaysia as indentured laborers in plantations, while Malaysia was still ruled by the British. Most Malaysian Indians are Tamil-speaking, while some speak Telugu, Malayalam, Hindi and Punjabi (Singh, 2013). One incident reported in the news involved Sri Sakthi Sri Sinna Karuppar Alayam, an 80-year-old Hindu temple. Although the temple committee asked the landowner, a foreign national, for the land on which the temple was situated, the demolition was carried out with the assistance of over 300 police officers and members of the Federal Reserve unit (Malaysakini, 2018; P Ramasamy, 2018). Similar situations also happened in 2017, in which about 50 Indians protested against the demolition of the Sri Val Jadhva Muneeswarar Temple at Selangor (Bernama, 2017), in 2007 regarding the demolition of the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple in Padang Jawa (The Star Online, 2007), and in 2006 concerning the demolition of the 100-year-old Malaimel Sri Selva Kaliyamman Temple (Reuters, 2007). In addition, over 10,000 Malaysian Indians gathered and protested against racial discrimination and the demolition

of Hindu temples in 2007 (Bendeich & Fernandez, 2007).

Nonetheless, to our knowledge, Islamophobia among Malaysian Indians is seldom reported, and no empirical study has been conducted to explore Malaysian Indians' perceptions of Islam and Islamophobia. Therefore, intergroup contact theory was used as a framework in this study to explore the formation of Islamophobia among non-Muslim Indian undergraduate students in Malaysia. Since Allport first introduced intergroup theory, it has been widely adopted in social psychology studies to understand the formation of prejudice (Everett & Onu, 2013). This theory claims that prejudice is formed through a person's misunderstanding or lack of understanding about another person, and that increasing contact between people from one group would improve their knowledge and understanding of another group, thus reducing stereotype and prejudice among those in the former group (Dovidio et al., 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Intergroup contact theory has been applied to reduce the reported prejudice against certain racial and ethnic groups, as well as individuals with disabilities and mental disorders (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Pettigrew et al. (2011) confirmed the robustness of this theory by conducting a meta-analysis, in which they examined 713 independent samples from 515 studies that have applied intergroup contact theory in prejudice studies. Importantly, significant negative relationships between contact and prejudice are still found in many studies, even without the inclusion of the four facilitating conditions (Everett & Onu, 2013): equal status, common goals, absence of intergroup competition and authority sanction (Pettigrew, 1998).

In this study, we recruited non-Muslim Indian undergraduate Malaysian students from a private (PR) and a public university (PU) to understand the formation of Islamophobia and their perceptions of Islam. Given that the majority of students in PUs are Malay, whereas most PR students are Chinese, it is expected that the frequency of contact with Muslim classmates in private and public universities would be different. Thus, the formation of their Islamophobia and their perceptions of Islam would also vary. The comparisons between Malaysian non-Muslim Indian undergraduate students from a PUs and PR would enable the researchers to find the applicable intergroup contact theory with which to understand the formation of Islamophobia. This study targeted undergraduate students as they are the future elites of Malaysia, and their views may become influential for the future development of the country.

The research questions are as follows: (1) Do participants from private and public universities have different levels of contact with Muslims? (2) Do they have different levels of knowledge about Islam? (3) Do they have

different perceptions of Islam? (4) Do they have different levels of Islamophobia? If so, why?

## 2. Methods

A qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory research design was employed to study the undergraduate students' perceptions of Islam. The research team designed an interview guide for the present study, including four semi-structured questions: (1) Can you share your experiences of interacting with people of a different religion? (2) How did you obtain your knowledge of Islam? (3) What is your perception of Islam? (4) What do you understand of Islamophobia?

The interviews were conducted in English and were audio recorded. Then, the recordings were transcribed and coded into themes. To elicit the participants' experiences during the interview sessions, probes and impromptu questions were used to draw out details that would help the researchers understand their experiences further.

### Participants and procedure

A total of 16 Indian undergraduate students from private and public universities was recruited using a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which the sample selection is based on whether the sample is a good fit for the study based on unique inclusion and exclusion criteria (Daniel, 2011). For the inclusion criteria used in the current study, participants must be Malaysian, must be non-Muslim Indians, and currently enrolled at a private or PU. Those who did not fit the criteria were excluded from the recruitment. The focus group discussions were conducted separately for the participants from the public and private universities. The qualitative focus group discussion was used in this study, in which the participants were encouraged to interact with one another during the discussion, the interviewer/moderator asked them specific questions about a topic or an issue for group discussion, and data were collected during the sessions (Wong, 2008). After obtaining approval from the university ethical and scientific committee, a poster was displayed to recruit participants at the faculty notice board. All recruited participants were briefed on the study's purpose, privacy and confidentiality issues, and respondents' right, risks, and benefits. They were required to fill in an informed consent form before the group discussion. Two focus group discussions were formed, one each for students of either public or private universities. There were eight participants in each discussion group: four males and four females. Each group discussion was conducted in a private room. An MP3 recorder was used to record the discussion sessions after obtaining permission from all the participants. All the students received a token of RM30 TESCO vouchers

after completing the focus group discussions that took about one hour each.

### Data analysis

An independent project assistant who was not involved in the study helped transcribe the audio recording. The transcripts were then distributed to the other researchers in the team who were tasked to perform the coding. Data were identified and sorted according to the aim of the study (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The Nvivo program was used for the data analysis. The coding for all transcripts was conducted following the qualitative analysis stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): reading the transcript and organizing the data, categorizing ideas and concepts, building themes from the categories, reviewing the themes, naming and defining the themes, and writing the report. Moreover, three researchers independently analyzed the data by using a similar approach to validate the data. The themes identified were then reviewed. The researchers discussed with one another to reach a consensus in the event of disagreements on the organization and categorization of the resulting themes.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### Differences in the degree of contact between participants from public and private universities

Schools and universities are places where the Indian participants interact with Muslims ( $n = 11$ ). The participants who study at the PU have more interactions with their Muslim classmates ( $n = 8$ ) than those from the PR ( $n = 3$ ). This may be due to the fact that there are more Malay students in public than in private universities, in which they interact during their curriculum activities and academic studies. As one student shared:

*In the public university, my close friends are Malay, as I am the only Indian in my course. We always eat and play together. My ability to communicate in English and Bahasa Malaysia helped me to interact easily with them. (Participant 4, PU)*

*I don't have the chance to interact with friends of other ethnicity as I came from a Tamil school. I do have a few Malay friends while I was in the secondary mainstream school, but now I don't interact with them as they are from different places. Although we don't meet often, when my Muslim friends invited me to their wedding I accepted it. Now in this private university, I have more Chinese than Malay friends. (Participant 2, PR)*

Apart from the schools and universities, neighborhoods with different ethnicities make up another important context in which the participants interact with Muslims, especially among participants from the PR ( $n = 2$ ). As one participant shared:

*For me, in my hometown, my neighbor is Chinese on my left-hand side, while there is a Malay guy opposite from us. Most of my neighbors are multiracial people, so I know them very well them. Every night, we just hang out—Malay, Chinese, Indian. I am the only Indian so we just hang out for the mamak shop where we go makan, went for supper like that. (Participant 7, PR)*

The results revealed that the educational setting and neighborhoods are the primary contexts in which the participants interacted with Muslims. Specifically, the participants from the PU had more contact with their Muslim classmates while doing their assignments and activities, whereas those from the PR have less contact with their Muslim classmates and more contact with their Malaysian Chinese classmates who are non-Muslims. However, some participants reported the importance of neighborhoods: they interact more with Muslim neighbors because their living areas consist of people from different ethnic groups.

### Knowledge of Islam

In Malaysia, all undergraduate students from public and private universities must study Tamadun Islam and Tamadun Asia Tenggara (TITAS; Islamic and Asian Civilization). Thus, many of the participants learned Islam through this course. In addition, some of them learned about Islam from social media and/or through interactions with Muslim friends and course mates. The participants from both universities shared the following:

*For me, one factor is that the university requires us to study Tamadun Islam and Tamadun Asia Tenggara, so we know a few of the stuff from there. (Participant 7, PU)*

*I have known about Islam through the History Sejarah since Form 1 to Form 5. That's how I get to know about their perlembagan and perjanjian. (Participant 8, PU)*

*I will get the knowledge directly from my friends; any question I got, I will just ask them or even from Youtube we can see that. (Participant 3, PR)*

*I get my knowledge from news. Sometimes I just search from everything for instance blogger or something. (Participant 2, PR)*

The results suggested that participants from the PU possessed more knowledge about Islam than those from the PR. Participants from both public and private universities obtained their knowledge of Islam through the study of history subjects in their secondary schools and the study of compulsory course, TITAS, in their universities.

### Perceptions of Islam

Two participants from the PR and two from the PU possessed positive perceptions of Islam. Moreover, some participants agreed that Islam, like Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism, is a religion of peace, and were impressed by Muslim's disciplining. These sentiments are expressed in the excerpts below.

*I think Islam is a very nice religion, peaceful religion, equal to other religions. (Participant 5, PR)*

*Actually, I have a good perception of Islam... they pray five times every day, so they are very disciplined. (Participant 4, PU)*

*They are so sincere in their prayers and during their puasa time. They are also sincere to their god that's it. (Participant 3, PU)*

Five participants, three from the PU and two from the PR, mentioned having negative perceptions. The negative perceptions may be related to strict practices and some negative experiences. The following are examples shared by some of the participants:

*For me, I think when I see what Islam people believe I believe that they are being forced into something that they...Some of them don't want to do it, but they are being forced. (Participant 2, PU)*

*Based on what my Muslim friends tell me, I see that one difference in Islam that I don't see in other religion is that you cannot speak against or ask about religion, you just have to follow it because by going against or asking why is this, what is that out of curiosity, it's almost considered a sin. The second thing that I don't accept about Islam is it gives birth to Islam to have this superiority complex that other races and religion are inferior to them who are non-Muslim. (Participant 1, PU)*

*In Deepavali, we believe the cow is our god. So, last year, one day before Deepavali, they are selling the cow they cut the cow in front of the Kuil and they are selling [the cow] in front of the Kuil, so that one I cannot accept. (Participant 8, PR)*

*But some of my teachers from secondary school have a very bad perspective, because my pengetua herself asked me to take out the Indian thing tie. She feels that it's not a good way but I think that it's my belief about my god but when she tells that, I feel so bad. (Participant 1, PR)*

The results indicate that participants from both public and private universities have mixed perceptions of Islam. Although some admire the disciplined way by which Muslims follow their practices, the others perceive Islam as a religion that cannot be questioned and that some

Muslims are forced to obey the teachings and religious practices.

### Islamophobia

Most of the participants understand that Islamophobia refers to one's fear of Islam among non-Muslims. Their Islamophobia seems to be related to the social media's portrayal of past terrorist attacks and suicide bombings of innocent people by Muslims in some countries and the discrimination toward non-Muslims in Malaysia. This sentiment was shared by two participants:

*I am afraid of Islam because through the media, I learned that Muslims killed a lot of innocent people in the name of Allah. (Participant 6, PU)*

*In some Muslim countries, the terrorist perception of Islam is too extreme and fanatical. They believed that by killing non-Muslims they will go to heaven, thus, they are willing to sacrifice their lives by being suicide bombers. (Participant 3, PR)*

Generally, most participants from public (n = 6) and private universities (n = 7) did not associate Islam with terrorism. They felt that Islam is not linked to terrorism. However, the fact that some Islamic fighters are terrorists does not mean that all Muslims are terrorists, so there is a misperception of Islam as related to terrorism. For example:

*I respect the religion; it is good and disciplined. The problem is not with religion but with the people who have the wrong interpretation of the teachings. Some of them overreact like messing up the halal and laundry issues. (T5, PU)*

*Basically, Islam has been used by some people to suppress the religion of other people, (T1, PR)*

Meanwhile, a participant thought that terrorist behaviors are not related to Islam but their historical issues:

*It is the Westerners who generalize Muslim people as terrorists, as they viewed them as suicide bombers. This is because some of them may experience certain trauma or tragedy due to terrorism. (T1, PU)*

The results indicated that participants from both public and private universities shared their views of Islamophobia. All the participants are able to differentiate Islam and terrorism and attribute the latter to personal factors or wrong interpretations of Islam than to Islam's teaching. Notably, participants have less contact with Muslim classmates in a private than those in a PU, but their knowledge and perceptions of Islam and Islamophobia are quite the same. A possible reason is that the frequency of contact does not necessarily increase understanding of each other's culture and religious

beliefs. Given that religion is a sensitive issue in Malaysia, many of the participants interacting with their Muslim classmates mostly do so related to academic study and activities. However, there are fewer exchanges of cultural and religious thinking during their interactions.

#### 4. Conclusion

Overall, this study's results do not support the application of intergroup contact theory to understand the formation of perceptions about Islam and Islamophobia among Malaysian non-Muslim Indian undergraduate students. Participants from the PR have less contact with their Muslim classmates than those from the PU, but their knowledge and perceptions of Islam and Islamophobia are quite the same. According to Christian et al. (2014), increasing contact can only strengthen the existing prejudice without knowledge. Therefore, it is important not only to increase contact between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia but also to increase their knowledge of each other's cultures and religions.

Through increasing contact and knowledge of both Muslims and non-Muslims, it is believed that the Islamophobia among non-Muslims would be reduced, which, in turn, would increase harmony among different ethnicities.

#### Limitations

Nonetheless, there is a need to be cautious regarding this study's interpretation due to some limitations. First, only a small number of undergraduate students were recruited in the focus group discussion. Thus, this study's findings should not be generalized to all Malaysian non-Muslim Indian undergraduate students. Second, the findings should not be overgeneralized to all non-Muslim Indians in Malaysia. This is because people from different demographic backgrounds, such as gender, educational levels, and age groups, may have different perceptions and levels of Islamophobia. Therefore, more studies are clearly needed to examine this issue further.

Third, the current qualitative findings provide important information about the factors associated with the perceptions of Islam and Islamophobia among Malaysian non-Muslim Indian undergraduate students. However, it would be ideal for future research to consider employing a quantitative study design by recruiting a larger sample with different demographic backgrounds to examine the relationships between these factors, on the one hand, and public perceptions of Islam and Islamophobia on the other hand.

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