

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 15 October 2024

Bajau Laut Evictions and Home Demolitions in Sabah, Malaysia: Polarised Streams of Online Opinion

*Benjamin YH Loh, Sarah Ali and Vilashini Somiah**



A boy chats to his fellow classmates while learning Bahasa at Sekolah Alternatif, an NGO-run school for stateless children to get an education, in a classroom in Bangau-Bangau on 23 May 2024 in Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia. (Photo by Mailee Osten-Tan/Getty Images) (Photo by Mailee Osten-Tan/GETTY IMAGES ASIAPAC / Getty Images via AFP).

**Benjamin Y.H. Loh is Visiting Fellow of the Media, Technology and Society Programme, at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and is Senior Lecturer at Taylor’s University, Malaysia. Sarah Ali is a PhD candidate at the Gender Studies Programme at Universiti Malaya. Vilashini Somiah is Senior Lecturer at the Gender Studies Programme at Universiti Malaya.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In June 2024, the Sabah government demolished and burned hundreds of wooden houses belonging to the stateless Bajau Laut community in Semporna, leaving them homeless. Security and environmental conservation were cited as reasons for this action, but it was later revealed that the site had been earmarked for a new township.
- The Bajau Laut are a sea nomadic community in the Sulu Sea. They are considered stateless and are negatively portrayed in the media as contributing to the increased crime rates and other social ills in Sabah.
- The evictions were highlighted on social media by the local activist group Borneo Komrad, which then triggered a contentious public debate on the community.
- The discourse on social media was strongly divided between the anti- and pro-migrant voices. The anti-migrant camp condemned the Bajau Laut, echoing the stereotypical allegations of their involvement in criminal activities, while the pro-migrant groups focused on pressuring the government to be more responsible and compassionate towards the community. This debate highlights the social cleavages within Malaysia regarding the issue of stateless migrants and how this affects Malaysian society.
- After the announcement of the new township, the anti-migrant groups became muted, having lost the moral high ground. As public opinion turned against the government, the authorities resorted to repressive measures, such as charging members of Borneo Komrad for sedition and other misdeeds, as the activists continued to fight for the community in the following months.

INTRODUCTION

A recent online furore over the demolition of homes belonging to the Bajau Laut community in Sabah raised anti-migrant rhetoric and the use of repressive measures in stifling citizen activism supporting the minority group. On 4-5 June 2024, a demolition operation was carried out in Semporna, Sabah, which saw the tearing down and burning of 273 wooden stilt houses belonging to the Bajau Laut. The operation, carried out by Sabah Parks, was justified on the basis of enhancing security¹ and protecting the ecology within the Tun Sakaran Marine Park.

Considered stateless, the sea-faring, nomadic Bajau Laut community has long been marginalised and been left without access to education, health and other government services. They have also been subject to negative portrayal by the media, who attribute increased crime rates and other social ills to their presence.² However, when the evictions and home demolitions took place, an active social media campaign in support of the Bajau Laut community ensued, initiated by Borneo Komrad (BK), a civil society migrant protection group.³

Some netizens (including Sabahans) were up in arms over the loss of these homes and the violation of the Bajau Laut's human rights, highlighting that the community had existed and lived on these waters even before the creation of nation-states⁴ and should not be treated in a callous and inhumane manner by the authorities,⁵ regardless of their legal status in Malaysia.⁶ In response, the Sabah government justified the evictions on various grounds; claims were first made that the Bajau Laut had been given early notice⁷ and that the whole process was a legal exercise,⁸ then denials from the government that there was any destruction of homes,⁹ and finally classification of it as a "security" issue.¹⁰ However, the real reasons for the evictions and demolitions became clear within a fortnight, when it was announced that a RM478 million township¹¹ was being planned for that area.

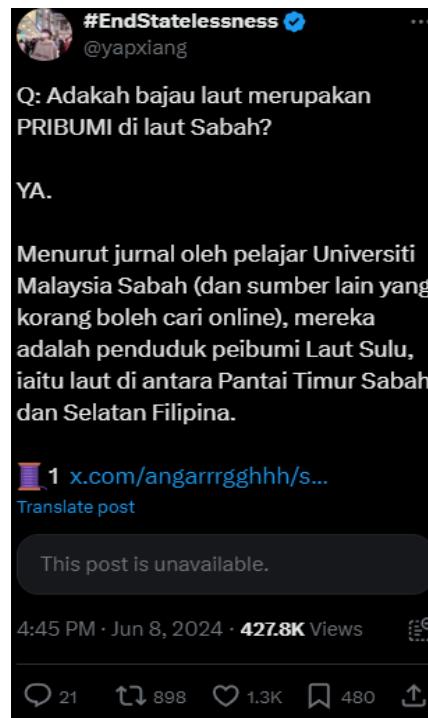
Following news of the evictions, online narratives disparaging the Bajau Laut had emerged, to clash with the pro-Bajau Laut narratives driven primarily by the social media accounts of Sabah-based social activists, Yap Xiang and BK. After the township development was announced, however, a huge shift was observed, and the anti-migrant voices grew silent (having lost the moral high ground) and pro-Bajau Laut voices grew stronger from the vindication. Having lost public support, the government then reverted to the use of the Sedition Act against BK and other activists to stifle their opposition and criticism of government actions.

DIVIDED ONLINE DISCOURSES

As mentioned, the initial response and furore were primarily driven by two social media accounts belonging to BK and Yap Xiang. Yap Xiang had joined BK to assist on two different fronts. The fact that BK was the boots on the ground engaged with the communities brought direct attention to their plight through the use of hashtags such as #PandangKeSabah.¹² The group had its members embedded in the community and kept recording the situation to ensure that further evictions and harassment would not occur.

Yap Xiang, in turn, pushed online narratives towards a more open and progressive view of the Bajau Laut.¹³ He faced tremendous resistance from detractors from both Sabah and West

Malaysia, but remained largely undeterred by these attacks. In one instance, a dormant fake account masquerading as him was activated to misrepresent his views; this was quickly reported to the service providers, who then had it removed.¹⁴



A thread made by activist Yap Xiang (@yapxiang) which provided information and debunked common misconceptions that the public might have against the Bajau Laut community. This thread generated a lot of traction, with 1,300 likes, 898 retweets, 21 replies, and 480 saves on X.

Within the week, many other CSOs across Malaysia rallied in support and kept focus on the issue since no satisfactory response from both the state and federal governments had been made.¹⁵ Much of the discussion was focused on the Bajau Laut and sought to avoid broaching the much larger issue of other irregular and stateless migrants in Sabah, seen as a much more difficult and treacherous socio-political landscape to navigate at that moment. The legal status of the Bajau Laut was argued as being very different from other migrant and non-citizen groups found in Sabah and the two situations should not be conflated.

West Malaysians were also quick to jump on this issue as it started to go viral on social media. The response came from two very clear camps: ethno-nationalists seeking to heighten anti-migrant discourses, and Bajau Laut supporters hoping to protect this vulnerable group. The ethnonationalist arguments used were practically identical to those employed against the Rohingya, shifting to portray the Bajau Laut as Filipinos in disguise who were seeking to change the demographics of the state.¹⁶ What the other side highlighted was the obvious hypocrisy in how Malaysia supports Palestine in its fight against Zionist colonialism, but turns a blind eye when it came to vulnerable and marginalised groups within its own borders.

The continued vocal dissidence from BK, along with the shift in public opinion after the township announcement, eventually led to the arrest of BK founder and teacher, Mukmin Nantang, and his students under the Sedition Act.¹⁷ Malaysia has had a long history of wielding the colonial era Sedition Act to curb freedom of speech and drown out protests.¹⁸

News of the arrests was met with widespread condemnation from many quarters¹⁹ for being a clear return to digital regression.²⁰ Out on bail, Mukmin was once again arrested on 14 August 2024, together with four others for allegedly disrupting Sabah Parks' eviction operation within the Tun Sakaran Marine Park.²¹

THE DIVIDED SABAH PUBLIC

A few Sabah accounts were the biggest supporters of these evictions, citing the presence of these “stateless migrants” as an ongoing threat to local communities.²² Much of the rhetoric was focused on the unwanted presence of the community and the many social ills associated with the community such as begging, crime, and drug abuse. Certain accounts began sharing videos featuring “migrants” in Sabah engaging in illicit and criminal activities such as glue sniffing.²³ These accounts were also quick to utilise the claim made by the Sabah Chief Minister that these evictions were done out of concerns over national security.

We observe that these accounts essentially were conflating the greater issue of stateless migrants in Sabah with that of the Bajau Laut. These netizens were unable to differentiate Bajau Laut statelessness from the issue of illegal immigrants and refugees who arrived in the 1980s from the Southern Philippines. Furthermore, they engaged in perpetuating harmful and problematic stereotypes of these communities such as arguing that the community “chooses to be beggars”, believing that they “sniff glue” as part of their culture,²⁴ and simply labelling them as terrorists.²⁵ These groups were vehement in denying any rights or support to the Bajau Laut, arguing that this would open the floodgates and allow for mass migration of new “citizens” into Sabah and overload its already underfunded social services (healthcare, education, etc.).

Fundamentally, the rejection of the Bajau Laut is deeply rooted in anti-migrant racism, and many of these Sabah accounts do not see any difference between the Bajau Laut community and other migrant groups that are in Sabah. One video showing a woman lamenting the loss of her home inspired one netizen to question why she was speaking Tagalog, while others at the same time pointed out that she was speaking the Bajau Laut language.²⁶

There has, of course, been some sympathetic Sabahans outside the CSO spaces, who highlight the need to consider the nuanced difference in the plight of the Bajau Laut in comparison to other migrants.²⁷ They reject the claims that they are “Filipino” and accept that they have lived in Sabah/Malaysia for generations and recognise the need to either grant them citizenship or some form of legal status so that they have a chance to be integrated properly into Sabah society.

While we could not determine which groups represent the majority of Sabahans, it was interesting to see that both sides of the debate had sizeable supporters, and that the debate rarely caused anyone to change their views. At the same time, state and federal authorities had remained silent on this issue beyond some initial statements, thinking that public opinion was

growing in support of officialdom. However, when public opinion shifted against them, rather than provide a counternarrative, they opted for digital repression instead.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the Sabah state initially felt that it could get away with the Bajau Laut evictions without attracting public furor. It was therefore surprised by the strength of the public backlash. The continuous marginalisation endured by the Bajau Laut has not only stripped them of their voice but has also provided a convenient pretext for the government to justify their eviction under the guise of national security concerns. Such a narrative obscures the true motivations behind these actions, which are often rooted in economic and political interests rather than genuine security needs. This has destroyed much of the credibility the state and even driven away their most zealous supporters who were strongly pushing their own xenophobic, racist, and bigoted views.

Major controversies involving migrant groups in Malaysia often draws out the ethno-nationalists and other intolerant netizens. While the federal government used to be a lot more welcoming of refugees,²⁸ there is a growing resentment that appears to be coming from the grassroots; this may be due to increasing costs of living, overburdening of social welfare services, and perceived threats to the racial dynamics of the country.²⁹ This has caused the governments to take a much more passive approach to migrant controversies (most notably the Rohingya) and in most cases to defer to the strictest enforcement of the law.

This was seen clearly here. Rather than involve itself directly in public debate on these issues (which we observed with the Rohingya community earlier this year),³⁰ the government has chosen to rely on the stronger anti-migrant sentiments among members of the public to drive public opinion. These sentiments are so strong and deep-rooted that ministers do not feel compelled to issue statements in response. This is of course especially useful to protect the government from being seen as anti-migrant or being seen to be going against public opinion. And when that fails, the government predictably reverts directly to the use of the Sedition Act rather than to do public engagement.

Situations like this will continue to happen in Malaysia's foreseeable future, unless the government and its people are willing to address the migrant issue at the root. What is heartening from this very unfortunate eviction story is the number of Malaysians who stepped up in their support of this small community. If these acts of solidarity continue to grow then perhaps public opinion may shift in due time towards fostering more humane and sustainable policies on migrant and non-citizen issues.

ENDNOTES

¹ In December 2016, a shootout took place between Malaysian security forces and Filipino gunmen involved in a cross-border kidnapping, leaving three of the gunmen dead and a policeman injured (<https://globalnation.inquirer.net/150466/3-dead-shootout-malaysia-forces-ph-gunmen>).

² Wan Hassan, W. S., & Peters, D. (2020). The vulnerability of Bajau Laut as stateless people in Sabah. *Jurnal Kinabalu*, 26(2), 183–183. <https://doi.org/10.51200/ejk.vi.2771>

³ BK's focus is on operating alternative learning centres for stateless children across Sabah but shifted towards advocacy during the pandemic where they protested inhumane lockdown measures on a low-income village. (<https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/25065/five-activists-detained-over-demo-to-end-emco-in-tawau-village>)

⁴ @BorneoKomrad. (2024, June 5). X. <https://x.com/BorneoKomrad/status/1798318330698400009>; @fizah_alias. (2024, June 10). X. <https://x.com/kraftwurker/status/1800131964252643771>

⁵ @ChrisanneChin. (2024, June 7). X. <https://x.com/BorneoKomrad/status/1798955963506188471>

⁶ @megiayampawEr. (2024, June 5). X. <https://x.com/megiayampawEr/status/1798353193191321843>

⁷ *Suhakam monitoring actions against Bajau Laut community*. (2024, June 9). Borneo Post Online. <https://www.theborneopost.com/2024/06/09/suhakam-monitoring-actions-against-bajau-laut-community/>

⁸ Lee, S. (2024, June 7). *Bajau Laut homeowners allegedly torch houses to gain sympathy after Semporna demolition, says Sabah minister*. The Star. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/06/07/bajau-laut-homeowners-allegedly-torch-houses-to-gain-sympathy-after-semporna-demolition-says-sabah-minister>

⁹ Lee, S. (2024, June 7). *Bajau Laut homeowners allegedly torch houses to gain sympathy after Semporna demolition, says Sabah minister*. The Star. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/06/07/bajau-laut-homeowners-allegedly-torch-houses-to-gain-sympathy-after-semporna-demolition-says-sabah-minister>

¹⁰ Miwil, O. (2024, June 11). *Sabah CM: Do not politicise demolition of illegal Bajau Laut settlements*. NST Online. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2024/06/1062278/sabah-cm-do-not-politicise-demolition-illegal-bajau-laut-settlements>

¹¹ Doksil, M. (2024, June 13). *RM478 mln township to be built in Semporna*. Borneo Post Online. <https://www.theborneopost.com/2024/06/13/rm478-mln-township-to-be-built-in-semporna/>

¹² @BorneoKomrad. (2024b, June 5). X. <https://x.com/BorneoKomrad/status/1798146139780440336>

¹³ @yapxiang. (2024, June 8). X. <https://x.com/yapxiang/status/1799362023589073074>

¹⁴ @yaoxiang. (2024, June 13). X. <https://x.com/yapxiang/status/1801199299059196050>

¹⁵ @ShaqKoyok. (2024, June 5). X. <https://x.com/ShaqKoyok/status/1798295578016899132>; @Article19Msia. (2024, June 28). X. <https://x.com/Article19Msia/status/1806577802906648773>;

@msiswakeupadilan. (2024, June 28). X. <https://x.com/msiswakeupadilan/status/1806553190407753869>

¹⁶ @scarredpotatoes. (2024, June 7). X. <https://x.com/scarredpotatoes/status/1798930591905399219>

¹⁷ Chan, J. (2024, June 27). *Vocal Sabahan Bajau Laut advocate Mukmin Nantang arrested for sedition now out on police bail*. Malay Mail. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/06/27/vocal-sabahan-bajau-laut-advocate-mukmin-nantang-arrested-for-sedition-now-out-on-police-bail/141792>

¹⁸ International Bar Association. (2023). *Malaysia: Repeal of archaic Sedition Act 1948 urged by IBAHRI, Clooney Foundation and other rights organisations in joint statement*. Ibanet. <https://www.ibanet.org/IBAHRI-joint-letter-on-Malaysia-Sedition-Act>

¹⁹ Md Zaki, H. U. (2024, June 27). *Amnesty International condemns arrest of Sabahan activist Mukmin Nantang amid controversial Bajau Laut evictions*. Yahoo News. <https://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/amnesty-international-condemns-arrest-sabahan-085201574.html>; Suaram. (2024, June 27). *From reform to repression: The worrying precedent set by Mukmin Nantang's case*. Aliran. <https://aliran.com/civil-society-voices/from-reform-to-repression-the-worrying-precedent-set-by-mukmin-nantangs-case>

²⁰ Haizan, R. Y. A. (2023, July 26). *Malaysia to review and limit Sedition Act to provocations against royal institution*. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-review-sedition-act-royal-institution-rulers-race-religion-legislation-3655011>

²¹ Free Malaysia Today. (2024, August 14). *Activists, 4 others held for interfering in evictions at Sabah Parks*. FMT. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2024/08/14/activists-4-others-held-for-interfering-in-evictions-at-sabah-parks/>

- ²² @none_existingmf. (2024, June 7). X. https://x.com/none_existingmf/status/1799035917963006117; @angarrgghhh. (2024, June 7). X. <https://x.com/angarrgghhh/status/1799093368695472642>
- ²³ @yong_hanni. (2024, June 7). X. https://x.com/yong_hanni/status/1799086103892496681
- ²⁴ @MALAYSIAVIRALLL. (2024, June 5). X. <https://x.com/MALAYSIAVIRALLL/status/1798266441281798219>
- ²⁵ @thelast_demigod. (2024, June 9). X. https://x.com/thelast_demigod/status/1799741452035256657
- ²⁶ @seraqqqq. (2024, June 6). X. <https://x.com/seraqqqq/status/1798523129612075131>
- ²⁷ @jsjdjdj16819783. (2024, June 11). X. <https://x.com/jsjdjdj16819783/status/1800524847820534099>
- ²⁸ Although Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Malaysia granted asylum to Vietnamese, Filipino, and Cham refugees (from Cambodia) facing political and religious persecution in the 1970s. Moreover, in the 1990s, Bosnians and in 2005, Achehnese fleeing ethnic cleansing were allowed temporary residence in the country. However, Malaysia’s application of its refugee policy is not uniform. While certain refugee groups are given some concessions, others such as the Rohingya community are treated harshly. See Munir-Asen, K. (2018). (Re)negotiating refugee protection in Malaysia: implications for future policy in refugee management. *German Development Institute*. <https://doi.org/10.23661/dp29.2018> and also Loh, B. Y. H., & Ali, S. (2024, January 22). Rhetorical sympathy for the Palestinian struggle in Malaysia and the poignant misuse of ‘Zionism’. *Fulcrum*, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.
- ²⁹ Ming, C. S. (2024, August 15). *Malaysian Air Force intervention in Palestinian crisis raises concerns over Arab states involvement*. Focus Malaysia. https://focusmalaysia.my/malaysian-air-force-intervention-in-palestinian-crisis-raises-concerns-over-arab-states-involvement/#google_vignette; Focus Malaysia. (2024, August 17). “*I chide PMX he’s better off being Palestinian PM as I’m upset he forgets many Malaysians are suffering, too.*” https://focusmalaysia.my/i-chide-pmx-hes-better-of-being-palestinian-pm-as-im-upset-he-forgets-many-malaysians-are-suffering-too/#google_vignette
- ³⁰ Loh, B. Y. H., & Ali, S. (2024, January 22). Rhetorical sympathy for the Palestinian struggle in Malaysia and the poignant misuse of ‘Zionism’. *Fulcrum*, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS.</p> <p>Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Cassey Lee, Norshahril Saat, and Hoang Thi Ha</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	---