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The Other Battle of COVID-19: The Rise of Discriminative Attitudes

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While the world is battling against the COVID-19 pandemic, another serious battle is also taking place: an increasing discriminative act against the “Asian-look” societies. In Australia, several video footages have gone viral showing such trend. In late March 2020, two teenage girls were racially abused on a street in Marrickville, Sydney, by a woman who attempted to kick them and spitted at them after expressing horrible racist words.¹ There is another video of a woman ranting against two young Asian commuters who were wearing masks on a train in Melbourne, telling them harshly to “go back to your

¹ AAP and Alana Mazzoni, “Top cop vows to find foul-mouthed youth who SPAT in a young women's eye after calling her an 'Asian dog with coronavirus' - and threatens to fine her \$5,000 for the 'disgraceful' act,” 31 March 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8169999/Cop-threatens-fine-woman-5-000-racially-abusing-spitting-two-girls-Marrickville.html>

home country.”² In early April 2020, a bus driver in Melbourne reported to the media how a female passenger suddenly called him ‘Corona’, due to his Asian-look, insinuating he was responsible for spreading the virus in the country.³

These are just a few examples of the alarming trend that is now unfortunately also happening in different parts of the world since the pandemic outbreak started in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The way certain governments, intentionally or not, described the virus as “Wuhan virus” or “Chinese virus” has contributed to the already xenophobic society.⁴ Thanks to WHO, the formal use of “COVID-19” to address the virus can be seen as a little bandage but certainly not the final solution to the problem.

Societal Consequences of COVID-19

As an international student myself, I am certainly alarmed with this development. In Australia, it was the Asians that first started to wear masks before it was customary to the other Australians, most likely learning from the examples set by people in the earlier-affected countries, such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. The face masks made them easy targets for such racial acts.

To certain extent, the statement from Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the 3 April 2020 to “make your way home” directed to visitors, including international students who are deemed unable to sustain themselves financially in the crisis, could be interpreted by some as implicitly showing a kind of ‘racial’ sentiment although it might not be intended so.⁵ The statement did have a kind of “nationalistic” sentiment, with the message that the country needs to focus on providing the necessary resources for “its own citizens and residents.”

Since the announcement, the international students, mostly through their chat groups, have raised their concerns and sought clarification to what the statement meant. In such an uncertain situation, when the international students are away from family and loved ones and facing uncertain future with their study, confusions can only add to their stress.

What I want to underline here is how the pandemic has had much greater impact than the number of death casualties.

The societal consequences of COVID-19 are immense. While it is still very much debatable whether an act to “securitize” the pandemic is necessary, the pandemic has, unfortunately, ramified into other serious security problems.

As limited movement due to the imposition of strict lock-down policy starts to frustrate people, added with being at the of losing their jobs and massive economic recession, those who perceive themselves as “natives” have started to find scapegoats for the unfortunate situations. Racial discrimination will certainly complicate the way governments should respond to the pandemic, which requires the focus not only the health management issues, which are already challenging.

² Alisha Rouse and Kelsey Wilkie, “REVEALED: Racist train rant that shocked Australia started when a mother asked two commuters wearing face masks for a cigarette - before allegedly PUNCHING one in the face,” 18 March 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8160485/Racist-coronavirus-rant-Melbourne-tram-ended-innocent-man-punched-face.html>

³ Chanel Zagon, “She called me corona: Melbourne bus driver racially abused by passenger,” <https://www.msn.com/en-au/news/australia/she-called-me-corona-melbourne-bus-driver-racially-abused-by-passenger/ar-BB126PyH>

⁴ Christopher Brito, “President Trump uses term “Chinese virus” to describe coronavirus, prompting a backlash,” CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-trump-coronavirus-chinese-virus-backlash/>

⁵ Sarah McPhee, “‘Make your way home’, PM tells visa holders,” 3 April 2020, <https://www.dailyexaminer.com.au/news/visa-holders-told-make-your-way-home/3988491/>

Observing Australia

Being a student in Australia, my current surrounding is naturally what I observe the most. Despite the fact that racial discrimination has always been a major problem in Australia, both federal and state governments have implemented strict measures against any discriminative acts in the society. In this way, the authorities have responded well.

Such response is enabled by existing regulations, most notably the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975. The Act was the first regulation to be issued regarding discrimination.⁶

As widely reported in the news, the police firmly respond to reports on the racial acts they receive. Nonetheless, it is important to ensure that they are consistently doing this and have the media to report this in order to deter like-minded racists to do any unlawful acts in the future. The police is notably present in public area, originally to maintain social distancing, but also helpful in preventing discriminative acts, especially those that involve violence. This is extremely crucial for international students as they have to rely on public transports to get their daily essentials.

The media once again has a very important roles in launching campaign against racial acts amidst this already difficult situation. A simple message that “it is not okay to be racist” goes a long way. As the country calls on all skilful people to serve as health workers and volunteers irregardless of their races and skin colour, such important message must be conveyed.

Observing Indonesia

Indonesia is one of the most COVID-19 affected countries in the region, with more than 2,000 confirmed cases (as of 5 April 2020). The central and local governments are struggling very much to provide sufficient health services to those who are affected. Having observed the Australian experiences, I have a little note for Indonesia, my home country.

So far, there has been not much coverage that the same precaution against discriminative acts is taking place in Indonesia. However, it does not suggest that it will not happen. It is an undeniable fact that racial discrimination, especially against the ethnic-Chinese is still a major issue in the country, although it seems to be superficially improved post-New Order era. A coverage on how an ethnic-Chinese shop owner has refused to increase the price of the products that she is selling and instead encouraging customers not to do ‘panic buying’ might be a little help to calm the potential cynical sentiments against the society as a rent-seeking group.⁷

A lot needs to be done as a response to the pandemic. Precautionary measures must be prepared by the government in dealing with possible racial tension. The government is indeed responsible to ensure the safety of its people. But the society can, and should, help by spreading the good spirit of togetherness which is the real modality to come out from this crisis.

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⁶ There are other regulations concerning three other types of discrimination, which are based on age (Age Discrimination Act 2004), disability (Disability Discrimination Act 1992), and sex (Sex Discrimination Act 1984).

⁷ Ryan Hadi Suhendra, “Saat Toko Teluk Gong Tolak Untung Besar Panic Buying Corona,” *CNN Indonesia*, 5 March 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200305161604-20-480830/saat-toko-teluk-gong-tolak-untung-besar-panic-buying-corona>