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MEDIA STATEMENT

Government Should Take Comprehensive Actions in The National Action Plan to Tackle The Threat of Religious Intolerance

Kuala Lumpur, 17th February 2022 | Initiative to Promote Tolerance and Prevent Violence (INITIATE.MY) is concerned with the rising threat of religious intolerance in the country and the lack of comprehensive actions from the government. We believe that in line with the government effort in developing the National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (NAPPCVE), this problem should be tackled.

Today, INITIATE.MY launched two databases on **(1) Cases of tension and conflict motivated by religious hatred and racism**; and, **(2) Laws that impact freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) in the country**. These are the first databases ever created in Malaysia that are centralised and open-access to trigger public discourses and produce effective responses to tackle religious intolerance.

Our findings include:

First, **religious intolerance is a threat to multi-ethnic and multi-religious society**. The period surrounding the 2018 General Election (GE) and first transition of government has seen a spike in intergroup conflicts through the mobilisation of political, religious, and civilian actors in protests, riots and vigilante activities spurred by religious and right-wing extremism. Within the same period, Malaysia was listed in the 'Warning' category by the Fragile States Index.

Aizat Shamsuddin, Director and Project Coordinator of INITIATE.MY stated that, "This trend is not surprising but alarming. It is rooted in a long process of radicalisation. Among others, the ideological narratives that justify superiority of one race or religion over 'the other' which normally targets the minority groups or individuals. Consequently, it has led to the legitimisation of hatred and use of violence to achieve hegemonic political goals. Furthermore, fragile political developments in Malaysia or the region could trigger extremist groups to react and mobilise, for example to pressure the incumbent government and spread fear in the society from effecting policy reforms for human rights and equality."

Second, **the state prosecution against minority groups on the grounds of religious or non-religious beliefs and thoughts and gender identity or sexual orientation can fuel intolerance**. There are more than 780 Syariah criminal provisions and gazetted fatwas that can be used on the aforementioned grounds. Our findings support GREASE's country assessment that states Malaysia is one of the countries in the world that has the highest legal and hegemonic restrictions on religious freedom. It will not only provide a justification in the society to discriminate against the minority groups but also for the extremist groups to take the law into their own hands in the name of religion as seen in the rise of vigilante activities by organised groups and spontaneous individuals.

Aizat Shamsuddin also stated that, “The federal and state lawmakers and religious bureaucrats (Muftis and Imams) should strategise and revisit some of the laws and fatwas that undermine the peaceful practice of religion or belief. It is evident that these policies do not help build cohesive and peaceful society in the long run and contradict with the core National Action Plans on Preventing Extremism and Unity, and Malaysia’s mandate as a member of the United Nation Human Rights Council (UNHRC). There are many context-based best practises to adopt in policymaking to promote greater religious freedom and tolerance such as Rabat Plan of Action, Marrakesh Declaration and Amman Message.”

Moving forward, we have made a few recommendations and urge the federal and state governments to take democratic and comprehensive actions in policymaking to tackle the root causes of religious intolerance in the NAPPCVE:

1. Take proportionate actions against political and religious figures or groups who incite hate and violence without fear and favour to mitigate such risks especially heading towards 15th GE.
2. Revive the role of interfaith council in Malaysia with independent status and equal representation of various faith groups to monitor and advise on policymaking and its implementation, and to reconcile interfaith issues from escalating into serious conflicts.
3. Revisit the laws, policies and fatwas that promote sectarianism (thaifiyyah) and excommunication (takfir) of other minority groups (Muslims and non-Muslims).
4. Develop and implement ‘Peace Jurisprudence’ or Fikah Kedamaian as the mainstream faith-based narrative to change hearts and minds of society to treat each other as equal citizens with respect, dignity, noncoercion and nonviolence.
5. Include mandatory interfaith and intercultural sessions in schools and universities that involve students and teachers from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to foster equal citizenship and nurture empathy in humanity.
6. Develop robust training on peaceful conflict resolutions such as dialogues and mediations in schools and universities, state assemblypersons (ADUNs) and Members of Parliament (MPs) to skilfully manage intergroup conflicts within the communities without resorting to violence.
7. Cooperate with wider civil society organisations (CSOs) in the consultation process of NAPPCVE to produce effective and evidence-based responses for sustainable impacts.

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Prepared by,

**Initiative to Promote Tolerance and Prevent Violence (INITIATE.MY)
Powered by Komuniti Muslim Universal (KMU Malaysia)**

About INITIATE.MY

Initiative to Promote Tolerance and Prevent Violence (INITIATE.MY) is a data-driven initiative to promote tolerance and prevent violence based in Malaysia. INITIATE.MY is powered by Komuniti Muslim Universal (KMU Malaysia) that was founded in 2015 by former radicalised youth committed to counter extremism with counter-narratives based on the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) and human rights frameworks.

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References

1. GREASE Indicators: Toolkit. See <http://grease.eui.eu/toolkit/>
2. INITIATE.MY Database 1: Malaysian Laws That Impact Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB). See <https://initiate.my/freedom-of-religion-and-belief/>
3. INITIATE.MY Database 2: Cases of Tension and Conflict in Malaysia. See: <https://initiate.my/cases-of-tensions-and-conflicts/>
4. National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (NAPPCVE): A Brief Report of The Malaysian Civil Society Organisations' (CSOs) Recommendations. See <https://initiate.my/nappve-csos-malaysia-recommendations/>