Going Halal:
Balancing Ingredients For Mutual Understanding

By Nur Diyanah Anwar

Synopsis

The move by foreign food chain 'Subway' to go halal in Singapore is a commercial, market-driven decision. Yet, it attracted undue reaction on social media. This should instead be an opportunity to bring the different communities together through a better understanding of the respective cultural and religious characteristics.

Commentary

THE HALAL food industry, which is flourishing around the world, has also been expanding in Singapore. As more eateries offer halal options, there has been an increase in halal certificates issued to meet demand from companies that want to tap into the huge potential of the halal market. However, news of the decision by the foreign food chain 'Subway' to stop serving pork in its effort to attain halal certification for all its Singapore stores has created discomfort among some customers.

While Singaporeans have largely been tolerant and accepting of other fast food outlets going halal, the online chatter which greeted the Subway decision was unprecedented; it was particularly present on Subway Singapore's Facebook page, with spillover to other social media platforms.

What is Halal?

Halal refers to what is lawful or permissible in Islam. This includes meat derived from animal slaughtered according to Islamic rites, and foods, pharmaceuticals and cosmetic products which do not contain traces of forbidden ingredients such as porcine or alcohol. The global halal industry has been flourishing, and is expected to reach US$891 billion by 2021.

While Singaporeans have been tolerant of different religious or cultural practices, the online noise over this incident does not reflect well on the state of social cohesion within Singapore society. This incident also mirrors sentiments abroad where some non-Muslims have resisted the growing presence of halal products.

The increasing visibility globally of halal or halal-certified products, as endorsed by the respective country's governing certification bodies, has also been marked by a pushback from certain quarters uncomfortable with this development. Coinciding with issues of terrorism and the global media's portrayal of Islam and Muslims, the prominence of halal products in today's markets has accentuated both Islamophobic statements and calls for the boycotting of halal-certified products.

For example, the 2016 Australian elections saw the growth of the anti-halal movement led by right wing parties and various groups opposing halal and halal certification, such as the worldwide "Boycott Halal" campaign.

Why the Reaction?

Those against halal certification argued that such a move imposes costs which are passed on to consumers. Some alleged that companies selling halal-certified products may channel funds to terror organisations. They have further claimed that the slaughtering of animals according to Islamic rites is unethical and inhumane. The boycotting of halal-certified products is to them a move against the perceived encroachment of Islam into public space.

In Singapore, views against the halal certification of food outlets and products have largely fallen into two categories.

The first comprises those who argued they would not be able to enjoy non-halal ingredients with the initiation of halal certification. In comments on Subway Singapore's Facebook page, some suggested a petition against its decision to gain halal certification.

The second are those who have made insensitive statements directed at Islam. In this vein, a similar "Boycott Halal in Singapore" group can be found on Facebook actively encouraging the boycott of various halal-certified items, brands and food outlets.

These comments have met with rebuttal by Singaporean Muslims. While their rebuttals are understandable, they should also be mindful that non-Muslims are equally entitled to their preferences for non-halal options.

Finding the Balance

Singapore is a multi-racial and multi-religious society. Most Singaporeans believe there should be space for negotiation between the needs and preferences of different groups. What should be of concern is when the push for preferences one way or the other leads to intolerance within Singaporean society.

This should not be allowed to take root. In this respect, it would be a matter of concern

if the local "Boycott Halal" campaigners align themselves with their foreign counterparts by disparaging local halal certification.

In the short term, one solution can be to franchise a separate halal-certified sister chain offering similar options. This would comply with requirements for halal compliance for the sister chain only. Attaining halal certification may be a commercial decision for many businesses to increase their customer base, but it does open up more opportunities to nurture good relations between different groups with the sharing of meals.

It also ensures preferences for non-halal options are maintained, and prevents unnecessary disagreements or protests which could be resolved with some innovation. As an example, local food chain 'Astons' established the highly successful sister chain 'Andes' offering halal-certified fare, while retaining their menu under the original Astons brand.

Going Forward

It should be noted that the trend in going halal in the retail sector is largely a market phenomenon. Companies which go for halal certification do so for their own commercial reasons - to respond to market demand, widen their reach and market share and ultimately raise their own profitability. The impetus is market-driven, not a religiously-motivated drive by any specific community.

At the same time, however, more needs to be done to roll back the propagation of intolerance within society. While this latest incident has not led to hostility between the groups, the polemics which followed still point to latent fault lines in Singapore's social cohesion.

In this vein, the need for deeper and continual engagement at the everyday, grassroots level should not be underestimated. Singaporeans should also seek to understand the needs and preferences of others, even as they seek to be understood. Such conversations should be done in the spirit of fostering greater mutual understanding and give-and-take.

Nur Diyanah Anwar is a Senior Analyst with the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.