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A cynical appeal to xenophobia: Hong Kong's 'fake refugee problem' is fake in itself

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Since the beginning of this year, certain media outlets, political parties and government officials have been exaggerating the asylum seeker/refugee issue, despite a lack of official statistics to prove that crime related to “refugees” has risen in the last year. Nevertheless, politicians continue to produce sensational figures and make irresponsible statements when describing Hong Kong’s “refugee crisis.” Recently, some politicians even positioned themselves as “champions” of ethnic minorities who – infuriated by troublemaking refugees – are suffering racism by association.



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Photo: Dan Garrett.

As far as facts go, the *portrayal* of asylum seekers, rather than individuals themselves, is at the root of public fear, and any talk of a “crisis” is a fire feeding itself. As justice advocate Tony Read has pointed out, Hong Kong does not have a refugee crisis – only a crisis of response. There are about 11,000 claimants in the city, and their presence neither constitutes a financial nor a social threat. The majority of asylum seekers didn’t “choose” to come to Hong Kong nor did they come here to take advantage of Hong Kong’s welfare system. They ended up in Hong Kong because of persecution, conflict, and human trafficking. They survive on meager support and endure incredible limitations in their daily lives.

Civil society groups and individuals recently signed a joint statement calling for calm on the refugee debate. They criticised the discussions as blowing a non-issue out of proportion, and overlooking the actual problem of the long processing time.



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From the fervor in which some politicians have been orchestrating and perpetuating stereotypes of asylum seekers, one cannot help but interpret their actions as part of an election strategy designed to capture Chinese votes by appealing to their xenophobia. They then target non-Chinese voters by holding out an olive branch to ethnic minority communities who suffer collateral damage in the smear campaign.

While Unison primarily serves ethnic minority residents in Hong Kong – and we are concerned about how ethnic minorities are treated in their daily lives and portrayed in the media – on the issue of asylum seekers, it is unwise to allow ourselves to be divided. We cannot tolerate the rise of fear-mongering politics that capitalise upon the vulnerability of ethnic minority residents who are often marginalised in Hong Kong society to begin with.

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John Wotherspoon

I spend dozens of hours each week helping asylum seekers. I know many hundreds of asylum seekers, including the latest arrivals. In my experience, there are genuine refugees among the asylum seekers who are fleeing persecution and conflict. But they are not "the majority". They are a tiny minority.

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