

Selfie with the Prime Minister

The day after the recent Eid al-Adha celebrations, the fourteenth edition of Malaysia's Freedom Film Festival was opened with the screening of *Selfie with the Prime Minister*, a bittersweet story of a 24 year old Rohingya refugee, Ziaur Rahman, and his quest for the freedom of his own people.

Joined in the foyer by half a dozen of his eagerly excited friends—including one he has known since his childhood spent in a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh—the poignant timing the film's release is not lost on Rahman. The premiere of *Selfie* came after a week of confirmed reports of violence against Rohingya, arguably amounting to genocide, along the Myanmar–Bangladesh border.

“In a few months there will be no Rohingya left if action is not taken against the Myanmar government”, says Rahman prior to the film's screening, scrolling along with his friends through social media feeds for any signs of the situation abating. Instead of the usual *Eid Mubarak* holiday blessings, highly distressing images of brutally slashed, incinerated, or bloated bodies of the elderly, women, and children, occupy their social media spaces; a salient reminder of what they have narrowly escaped, yet continue to fight for: peace and freedom for their people.

Selfie with the Prime Minister, co-directed by first time Malaysian filmmakers Nor Arlene Tan and Grace Cho Hee Won, was never going to be a film without irony. Rahman's turn to activism meant taking his concerns to the highest man in the land, Malaysia's scandal-plagued Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, who began vocalising his support for the Rohingya community last December in an action widely criticised as a [reelection ploy](#).

“They are at everyone's mercy and don't have a choice”, says Tan. “They would ride on any bandwagon willing to give a helping hand, even when it's politically motivated”.

Rahman is very much aware of the Prime Minister's diminishing popularity, particularly in the nation's urban centres, but nonetheless remains his most ardent fan.

“He is the only prime minister in the region who has spoken out about the genocide taking place in

the Arakan”, says Rahman, using the Rakhine State’s former name. He also [attended a December 2016 rally](#) which saw thousands of Rohingya refugees flock to a stadium in Kuala Lumpur, where the prime minister declared “enough is enough”.

That was the second time he scored a selfie with the PM, coming only days after his first shot (*above*) which was taken at the 2016 Kuala Lumpur International Youth Discourse. Dressed in a suit, shirt, and tie all borrowed from a friend, the affable Rahman cuts a confident and dignified presence among a dour-faced entourage who appear uncertain as to how to best handle a smartphone wielding millennial, determined to get a selfie with Najib.

For the PM’s annual public open house for Eid al-Fitr, Rahman invested in his own traditional Malay ensemble, topped off with a *songkok* hat, hoping to get another “wefie” with his hero. Unable to reach Najib’s side, Rahman sidles up to his wife, a festively bouffant Rosmah Mansor, for a series of shots in a scene which literally brought a full house down for his derring-do and lightheartedness during the screening.

Film directors Nor Arlene Tan and Grace Cho Hee Won state that they didn’t want to make “another refugee film” to further highlight increasingly familiar facts and figures, which they believe leaves little room for empathy. By delving deep into the experience of a young refugee living in Kuala Lumpur, such a story treatment would enable the audience to attach a human face to a humanitarian crisis currently unfolding in Myanmar, while helping at the same time to override local negative perceptions of refugees.

The ingenuity of this documentary is that it appears as if Ziaur Rahman had filmed it himself, comfortably sharing his story with an intimate group of friends, giving the impression we have known him far longer than the documentary’s mere 24 minutes.

Selfies, wefies, and feel good emojis aside, the film also touches upon the personal tragedy of Rahman’s having been trafficked at least seven times between Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand. On a boat heading toward Thailand, Rahman lost the sight of his right eye, a form of punishment meted out by the traffickers for attempting to steal their food. After eventually arriving in Penang, his ordeal continued when he was unable to pay his traffickers an exorbitant RM8000 debt. Left to starve, Rahman made an escape to Kuala Lumpur three days later, where he continues to be exploited by employers who take advantage of the fact that refugees are unable to work legally in Malaysia.

Activism is not a hobby for Rahman, it’s a commitment to affect change. And that seed of change was planted in the audience on the opening night of Freedom Film Festival, who were equally captivated by his plight, his charm, and his genuinely upbeat personality. Rahman is currently in the process of writing a book, which will depict the darker truth of the ordeals of himself and his friends—who, along with many thousands of Rohingya refugees, still have no place to call home.

As the credits rolled to the wild applause of the audience, his friends seated directly behind him reached out to his shoulders to offer a congratulatory hug, with his childhood friend leaning in to whisper, “I am so proud of you, brother”.

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Selfie with the Prime Minister will be screened at a number of locations around Malaysia prior to being uploaded to the Freedom Film Festival's online platform. You can [watch a trailer for the film here](#).

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Header image: a film still from *Selfie with the prime minister* shows Ziaur Rahman in a moment of reflection.