
Halal Food Crime in Malaysia: An Analysis On Illegal Meat Cartel Issues

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Abstract: Malaysia is known for its high level of sensitivity in the halal and haram aspects. Its status as an international halal hub reflects the sustainable halal ecosystem in the country, supported by the sensitivities of the government, industry and consumers. Unfortunately, there are irresponsible parties who make halal food a medium of crime. Thus, various food crime issues rise such as food crime, food fraud, food adulteration, food terrorism and cases that cover it. Accordingly, the objective of this article is to target the analysis of food crime issues in Malaysia, focusing on the issue of illegal meat cartels. In addition, various causative factors have been put forward, as well as modern technological alternatives as practical solutions. Data were analysed in a qualitative approach, in which data were collected through document analysis from various primary and secondary sources. As a result, the issue of illegal cartel meat has betrayed all consumers in Malaysia. The government needs to empower halal control in the country, including making practical use of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era technology.

Keywords: Food crime; halal; food fraud; food adulteration; empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian halal industry has experienced tremendous growth and has become a phenomenon in the market. Its rapid development is driven by strict laws on food safety, hygiene and economy fair play. Food products that are in line with the principles of *halalan tayyiban*; permissible to be consumed are in high demand among Malaysians, where majority are Muslims. This is also guaranteed by the level of quality, cleanliness and safety throughout the food chain process, thus giving confidence to the Muslim community.

Looking at the reality, the production of halal food continues to face various threats that threaten the integrity of *halalan tayyiban*, in terms of halal status and food safety. In detail, halal food must be in line with Islamic law; meanwhile *tayyiban* includes food that is poison and infection free with no harmful substances and no fraud in terms of weight, quality, expiration date, content and brand. In this case, the crime that occurs in the food chain is a threat that needs to be addressed in the growth of the halal industry. The majority of food crimes that occur are based on personal interests. The increase cases of logo abuse and halal food status fraud indicates that this crime is becoming more prevalent.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia ranks a special position in the global halal market. For Muslim consumers, halal is the main requirement. This indirectly encourages rapid growth of the halal food industry. Even so, after a repeated exposure both domestically and internationally have tarnished Malaysia's reputation as a world halal hub platform. The many years of effort and research of halal ecosystems in Malaysia for so long seem useless. Apparently despite the hard work of others, there are those trying to fish in troubled water.

Worldwide, food crimes such as adulteration and misuse of food labels are not a new phenomenon. According to Karen Everstine (2013), a total of 137 cases have been recorded since 1980 categorized into more than ten food categories, including fish and seafood, dairy products, fruit juices, oils and fats, cereals, honey and natural sweeteners, spices, alcohol, baby formula and so on. This is wish to maximize profit. Since the financial crisis of 2007 there has been a spike in food-related criminal activity, including sheep theft, trade in halal meat and mislabelling of food items.

Moreover, food crimes have occurred on other consumer products such as baby formula, where melamine was added to increase the protein content of baby formula milk in 2008 in China. Spices are also used as a tool in launching food crimes, where they detect Sudan and Myanmar dye adulteration in chilli powders, turmeric in India and Bangladesh, as well as shrimp paste containing dye agents which are not recognized in Myanmar.

In addition, the discovery of horse meat in processed beef products in 2013 shows that food crime is on the rise. A large-scale detection was conducted to identify the origin of the meat, which resulting in pig DNA found on halal food products in the United Kingdom. In one study, it was found that 22.5% of imported fish products manufactured by Italy were involved in food crime cases when the labels listed were not in line with the actual information. In another case, a honey producer in Corsica was arrested in 2018 for marketing honey as a PDO (Protected Designation of Origin), however the content was fake by blending imported honey.

According to Food Crime Intelligence (2019), a total of 364 food crime cases were reported in the first quarter of 2019. In Southeast Asia, the highest rate of mislabelling was found on products imported from three countries, namely China, Vietnam and Thailand.

In Malaysia, the food crime issue that has been reported is the manipulation of fresh palm oil. This syndicate has taken advantage, as palm oil is widely used by Malaysians in cooking. As a proof, the annual waste generated from cooking oil alone has reached 50,000 tons. Subsequently irresponsible parties have been manipulating fresh palm oil with used cooking oil since 1980-2010 in order to obtain huge profits.

In 2011-2015, there were allegation of artificial eggs and artificial rice in the Malaysian market. All these were followed by an investigation by the authorities, but it was found that the allegations were not true. After that, in 2015 cases reported involving food crimes such as misuse of the halal logo, adulteration of halal certificates and labels, and even worse cases of halal logo on products containing prohibited ingredients as well as sales of coffee containing pig DNA. Next, in 2017 the emergence of artificial honey made from sugar, starch and corn flour, fake zam-zam water and fake stevia was reported. Other common issues are the exchange and mixing of quality content with poor quality content such as replacing oil with lard because it is readily available and requires low costs.

Back to the topic, meat is the biggest target of halal food crime as it is the favourite of the world community. Every year, the demand for meat production increases, and this makes it the easiest target prospect. The majority of food crime issues involving meat products are like meat adulteration, mislabelling of meat products, and meat manipulation such as beef manipulation with buffalo meat in sausage production. In addition, the exchange of prohibited meat for halal such as pork is exchanged for beef, dog meat is exchanged with mutton and also the meat of animals that are not slaughtered.

In conclusion, there are various types of food crimes detected in Malaysia and this trend has never stopped. As a result, all these crimes have negative implications for the food industry, consumers and the world economy. It is rampant all over the world, both in developed and developing countries. The increase in food crime cases warns that the global food supply is at risk and alarming based on the revelation of cases every year. As a result, consumers are the most vulnerable and are facing risks on a larger and critical scale.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This study aims to discuss food crime issues in Malaysia, especially the issue of illegal meat cartels in terms of factors or causes of domestic food crime and how these criminals deceive the enforcement. It is therefore important to review and re-examine the shortcomings in monitoring and enforcement, further highlighting recommendations to address food-related crimes.

Data collection is done in a qualitative approach by analysing documents, journals, and articles related to food crime. In addition, additional information from the Malaysian authorities and the mainstream media also helped to complete the study. Emphasized here, the study focused more on practical solutions in the Malaysian context.

Definition of Food Crime

There are various terms that appear when trying to explain the differences in issues involving food crime that led to confusion of terms. Among the terminology that is often used are food contamination, food crime, food fraud, food adulteration and food terrorism. To clear up the confusion of terminology that occurs, all these terms have been categorized under one large scale focusing on a specific variation of form which is the food crime.

In Malay, food crime is said as “jenayah makanan” refers to the combination of two words with different meanings, namely crime and food. Crime or jenayah comes from the Arabic word 'al-Jinayah.' According to al-Mawardi (1989), crime means all kinds of offenses according to Islamic law that can be punished on the offender either by hudud or ta'zir. Nowadays, various types of new crimes involving technology arise such as cybercrime, food crime and so on. Food or makanan, on the other hand, is anything used as food, dishes and delicacies. Food is also defined as something taken or eaten to supply energy and physical health for survival.

In terms of terminology, Elliot (2014) defines food crime as a planned activity by a large group aimed at injuring and deceiving consumers through food. Meanwhile, the England Food Standards Agency in collaboration with the Scotland Food Standards explains the more general and broad meaning of food crime which means the dishonesty of food productions or suppliers. Rebecca (2017) defines it as a nefarious activity done by individuals or groups on the food chain process for their own objectives and motivations.

It can be concluded that food crime is nefarious activity that is planned and intentionally done by one party either individually or in groups on any process throughout the food chain with its superficial own purpose such

as achieving vast profits, evil elements, ideological spread and so on. It means putting great risk to every individual who is likely to be affected because it involves basic human needs. In other words, food is used as a weapon to succeed in this type of criminal activity.

In the framework of food crime, all the terminology involved is seen as similar, where it involves threats throughout the food chain process either intentionally or otherwise. Nevertheless, food crime is more focused on intentional threats, despite the emergence of various terminologies related to this crime so as to cause confusion. As a result, figure 1.0 was formed to facilitate an understanding of the terms and its relation to each other. The variety of terminology related to food crime has also been differentiated through the motive and purpose of the attack.

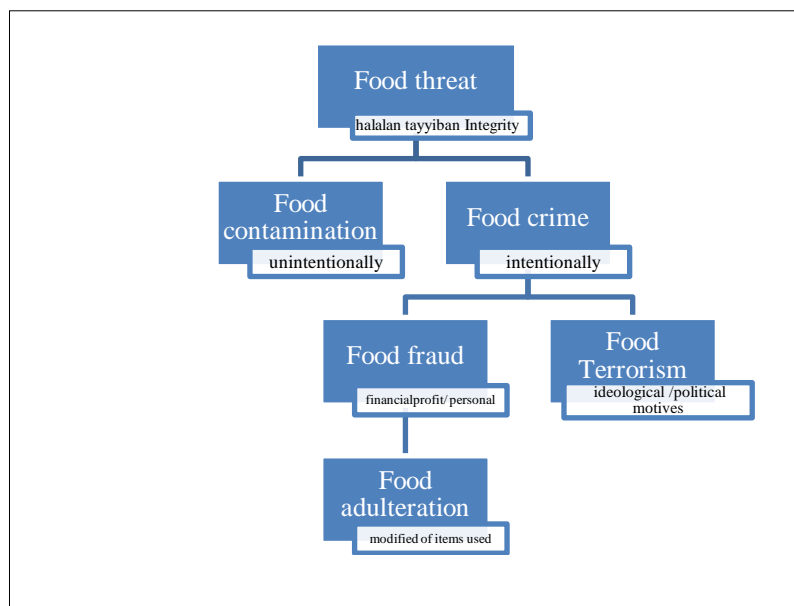


Figure 1.0: Category of Food Crime Terminology

(Source: Researcher Analysis)

From the diagram, it is concluded that there are two biggest forms of food threat that threaten the integrity of halalan tayyiban, namely food contamination and food crime. Both of these threats include acts committed intentionally or unintentionally. This study focuses more on intentional threats, which are related to food crime and its end products. In general, the two largest and most well-known branches of food crime are food fraud and food terrorism. Earlier, the difference of these terms depended on the motive and purpose of a criminal act. Food adulteration can be categorized under the falsified branch by replacing part or all of the food with poor quality substances that are fraudulent content and product quality.

Illegal Meat Cartel Syndicate in Malaysia

At the end of 2020, Malaysia was shocked by the news of the arrest of 1,500 tons of illegal meat cartel smuggling syndicate from four foreign countries, namely China, Ukraine, Brazil and Argentina. The meat cartel syndicate has been exposed and this criminal case has opened the eyes of various parties as it is believed to have been established in Malaysia for many years. These criminal syndicates cover a wide range of issues including the safety of imported meat, supply chain integrity, illegal slaughterhouses and non-halal meat processing.

According to media reports, the cartel used proxy company to expedite the criminal activities. They use Malay and Islamic-sounding names for the companies to lend an air of legitimacy to their operations and in assuring the Muslim consumer that the product is Halal. A warehouse based in Senai, Johor is used as location for making fake halal labels and stamps to be stamped on meat boxes. The supply of imported meat is stored in a special storage place before repacking the meat. Illegal meat that has counterfeited halal label is then distributed into the domestic market. Not only that, meat believed to be halal beef is also exchanged for low quality meat and diseased beef. This indirectly endangers the health of consumers in the long run. In addition to beef whose method of slaughter is questionable, horse meat, buffalo and kangaroo are also brought in. In addition, the discovery of pork entry records reinforces doubts about its halal status and quality. However, the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs (KPDNHEP) has denied this allegation that no pork, horses, and kangaroos were found during the raid.

However, statements and disagreements between media reports and government agencies have caused anxiety among Muslim consumers in Malaysia. This has become the main focus when it comes to the halal status of meat products. The majority of the people in Malaysia are Muslims, so it explains to why the halal status of meat products that have been enjoyed thus far is definitely a hot issue.

The expose of meat cartel crime cases has a huge impact that shows the weakness of the authorities in ensuring the integrity of halal food in Malaysia. The investigation, which began at the end of November 2020, is still hotly debated. JAKIM and KPDNHEP agencies are still monitoring and auditing the meat-based enterprises to prevent the spread of illegal meat from spreading.

In conclusion, this issue is profit-driven regardless of the safety and sensitivity of Muslim consumers. The increase of food crime in Malaysia makes Malaysians more cautious in making food choices derived from imported meat-based products. Recently, consumers in Malaysia are more inclined to the selection of fresh meat products and this has affected the source of income of imported meat traders.

Causal Factors

There are several of cunning tactics used by food criminals to deceive and attack consumers. They are able to adapt and diversify methods to achieve goals. Although the authorities in Malaysia have been trying to eradicate crime for a long time, unfortunately it still cannot be completely curbed. Although many arrests and actions have been made, such cases of fraud continue to occur.

In this regard, observation to the causes of the disappearance of criminal activities is analysed in order to find the cause and close the gaps that exist. A number of causes and reasons can be associated with food crime in Malaysia. However, it should be emphasized that this discussion only focuses on the causes of the smuggling of illegal meat cartels that have long been established in Malaysia.

First, the cunning of criminals would consider using 'rat holes' to succeed in their activities. This is the main reason for the increase in food crime cases in Malaysia. Part of the strategy used is to get help from the mafia or gangsters, where they are often involved in criminal activities and have large organizations, including 'insiders'. In this regard, forgery of documents such as customs forms, import permits, halal certificates, payment receipts can be done easily without being noticed by the authorities. The evil tactic in the issue of illegal meat cartels is that the proxy companies import meat sources is certified halal before mixing them with illegal meat.

Smuggling of prohibited goods and products that do not meet the requirements of the criteria is brought in in a smooth, organized and thorough manner.

Meanwhile, the negligence of some agencies and industries contributes to food crime activities, especially those directly involved in monitoring the import and export management of food products. According to media reports, one of the causes of illegal meat cartels is leakage among the enforcement authorities. In other words, dishonest practice in doing their job is a major cause of food crime cannot be dealt with.

The economic downturn that happened in recent years has caused some people to take shortcuts to enjoy a luxurious life. Money bribes and sex services are given as gifts. As a result, there has been abuse of power which is the responsibility of individuals to society and the country with corruption for the sake of temporary pleasure. This dishonesty can cause breakdown to an organization and thwart it. If not, why can illegal meat cartels operate for years and escape from the authorities, when inspections have been made in accordance with the procedure?

Another gap is the low rate of halal awareness among the industrial in Malaysia including suppliers, operators and product manufacturers. They see more halal symbols not only as quality assurance but more to profit stimulants. This is the cause of many cases of halal fraud without guilt. Here it is necessary to take into account the balance between religious value and profit based in the soul of all halal industry.

Finally, the outdated documentation system is the main cause of illegal meat leaks into the local market. The use of incompetent old systems, manual methods that are prone to non-transparency and no consistent improvement are factors that can be manipulated by syndicates. The syndicate's strategy to get a cheap supply of imported meat, tax evasion and halal certificate cost payment has succeeded in providing lucrative profits to suppliers. Therefore, the management of the contemporary system needs to be reviewed in terms of effectiveness and constraints so that they can overcome the halal food crime.

Dealing Method

Meat cartel issues show a very clear weakness in the control of halal food supply in Malaysia. All parties must be united in tackling halal food crime in Malaysia. This is important to maintain the integrity of halal food and regain consumer confidence.

Therefore, several initiatives are presented here to clean Malaysia's name on the world stage. One of them is by strengthening halal control standards. An efficient halal assurance system is important for controlling and closing the doors of harm. The beginning of illegal meat cartels indicates the need to improve the system by technology as time goes. Halal certificate application methods, recognized foreign certification bodies, design

halal logo, list of names of importers and suppliers as well as halal food import act need to be reviewed, re-examined and strengthened so that all halal food crime lanes can be curbed immediately.

Enforcement systems can be improved with the help of industrial revolution 4.0 technology such as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), where modern technology helps track the country of origin of imported meat and its movement before reaching consumers.

Other than that, block chain technology should be utilized. Every halal information of the product will be verified in the halal database. Thus, product information along the food chain starting from the legitimacy of authoritative bodies, raw material suppliers, manufacturers, wholesalers, logistics and retailers will be known. Users can also check halal verification and provide feedback by scanning a QR code using a smartphone. Thus, digitally coordinated storage of halal data at the global network level facilitates various parties to check halal status and ensure that it is in line with Malaysian halal standards.

In the meantime, the authorities need to streamline halal tracking methods in an effort to introduce the barcode digitization system of halal food products. The use of the 'Verify Halal' application is recommended to users to check the status of the product in three ways either using a barcode scan or typing product information or searching by product, brand, company and country. It makes it easier for consumers to get halal status before choosing a food product.

Apart from that, all halal food documentation, especially imported food, needs to be verified by the authorities more systematically so that there is no chances to manipulate food brought into Malaysia. With technological support this initiative is going smooth. Meanwhile entrepreneurs, wholesalers, distributors, suppliers and retailers need to constantly update the information with the authorities so that all information can be channelled completely and accurately. So issues such as fake halal stamps, fake halal certification etc. can be detected quickly when information coherence are achieved.

The efforts made by the authorities to establish the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) are the right moves. This establishment aims to investigate the issue of illegal meat cartels in depth. From another aspect, the establishment of a halal legal committee and enforcement is needed to coordinate legal actions related to halal food crime. Restricting food imports from high-risk countries could be the first step in combating the crime of illegal meat cartels. Authorities need to review foreign halal certification bodies and issue a list of halal meat importers approved by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM).

All parties involved in halal monitoring such as the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs (KPDNHEP), Royal Malaysian Customs Department (JKDM), Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and so on should work hand in hand in the mission of getting rid of halal food crime effectively. This is because, each organization has a limited scope of work. When it comes to leakage, honest, and trusting culture campaigns need to be inculcated in each individual through awareness, integrity and spiritual programs. Strict action against criminals be it individuals or groups who conspire is to suspend the approved permit (AP) holder license.

The final suggestion is to come out with a relevant food defence system to ensure halal control throughout the food chain. This aims to prevent any form of intentional food crime, ensure halal compliance and food safety, as well as upgrade the integrity of halalan tayyiban food in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Based on the increasing issue of halal food crime in Malaysia, this matter needs to be taken seriously. Although it does not directly involve life, it has negative implications for the sanctity of religion and Muslims when it comes to halal and haram issues. Specifically, the emergence of illegal meat cartels in Malaysia is a major threat and challenge in making Malaysia a country that serves as an international halal hub.

Therefore, various alternatives need to be implemented to prevent this from spreading. Thus, the authorities are responsible for intensifying efforts, streamlining initiatives and utilizing technology to defeat halal food crime activities. However, these efforts not only focused on the authorities but cooperation from all parties such as suppliers, operators, distributors and consumers is also needed so that the halal food industry in Malaysia can be strengthened, thereby giving rewarding returns to the country's economic sector. Hopefully this crime can be eliminated and consumers can enjoy food that is in line with the principles of halalan tayyiban.

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