

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

**Singapore** | 15 August 2017

---

## **Fault Lines – and Common Ground – in Malaysia’s Ethnic Relations and Policies**

*Lee Hwok Aun\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Five recent public opinion surveys addressing ethnic relations in Malaysia highlight both points of tension and divide and points of agreement and cohesion.
- On the plus side, the surveys show that Malaysians generally relate well across ethnic lines; show goodwill towards each other; broad multi-ethnic support for a shift away from ethnicity-based politics and political parties; and that increasing interaction and friendship fosters better understanding.
- Yet, Malaysians’ circles of friends tend to be ethnically homogenous; attitudes towards race and religion constrain inter-group relations and can widen divisions; and ethnic groups gravitate towards opposing positions on the issue of ethnic affirmative action.
- These surveys fruitfully inform public debate, policy making, and further research by highlighting the complexities of ethnic issues.

*\* Lee Hwok Aun is Senior Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnic relations and ethnicity-based policies are intensely debated in Malaysia, but often lean on personal opinion, anecdotal evidence, and selective observation. A recent flourish in surveys of public attitudes, perceptions and sentiments fruitfully fill this gap, supplying information and insight, revealing fault lines and areas of tension, but also finding common ground and cohesion. Given the complexities of ethnic issues and the limitations of surveys, this research does not and cannot provide definitive and exhaustive answers. Nonetheless, the surveys help us more than ever to unpack the many facets of ethnic relations and policy implications.

This article collates findings of five significant surveys, organized around four key insights. First, Malaysians interact amiably across ethnic lines but maintain friendships predominantly within their own group. Second, attitudes and perceptions of race and religion impact on inter-group relations, and the signs are potentially divisive. The evidence also shows that increasing cross-ethnic contact and friendship raises understanding and positive sentiment toward other groups. Third, Malaysians are distinctly divided along racial lines on questions of Bumiputera preferential policies and special privileges, as well as religion and ethnically delineated issues such as vernacular schooling. However, it remains difficult to get a good grasp of public opinion on these matters, because notions of equality, fairness and privilege are perceived differently. Fourth, attitudes toward ethnicity-based politics do not necessarily mirror attitudes toward ethnicity-based policies; while a majority disagree with ethnicity as the basis for politics, ethnically framed policies continue to garner majority support. These insights signal persisting and emerging fault lines in ethnic relations and policies, but also common ground to build on.

## OPINION AND ATTITUDE SURVEYS: BASIC INFORMATION

We consider five surveys that inform ethnic relations and ethnicity-based policies, either as the primary subject of research or a component of a broader enquiry. For brevity and presentation purposes, the survey rudiments are summarized in Table 1. A few notable features are worth noting here, in chronological order:

1. The Merdeka Center for Opinion Research has established a solid track record in public opinion polling, evidenced in its surveys' sampling size and scope and methodical, precise phrasing of its questionnaires. The 2015 National Unity Survey posed a range of questions on experiences and attitudes relevant to ethnic relations. The Political Values Survey of early 2010 touched briefly and insightfully on ethnicity-based policies<sup>1</sup>. We refer to these surveys as MC (2015) and MC (2010).

---

<sup>1</sup> The author thanks Tan Seng Keat for availing the presentation slides of the 2015 National Unity Survey. A summary of the 2010 Political Values Survey findings is available at: <http://www.merdeka.org/v4/index.php/downloads/category/2-researches?download=85:political-values-survey-2010-release&start=20>.

2. The Centre for a Better Tomorrow (CENBET) headed an inquiry on racism, publishing findings in April 2016.<sup>2</sup> This survey asks pointed questions and provides noteworthy snapshots, although it leaves room for respondents to interpret the questions, and is a bit too fixed on labelling attitudes as racist, even when the situation could be complex and nuanced.<sup>3</sup>
3. A survey of attitudes and ethnoreligious integration was overseen in September-October 2016 by Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer (AHW), who authored a full report presented to the CIMB Foundation which funded the study.<sup>4</sup> This work is more academic and sophisticated, posing seven research questions and exploring relationships between variables. Among AHW's pertinent contributions are connections between diversity of friendships and sentiments toward other groups, attitudes and knowledge vis-à-vis religions, and perceptions of discrimination, fairness and ethnicity-based policies.
4. Kajidata, a market research company, rendered a survey in March 2017 to enquire about public perceptions of unity and harmony, and to generate inputs for the Transformasi Nasional (TN50) project.<sup>5</sup> It expressly seeks to gauge support for government initiatives, and consequently phrases some questions in ways that unduly lead respondents. Nonetheless, it is a pertinent reference as a survey reflecting positive sentiments, with the caveat that its results are more prone to bias.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The CENBET survey's executive summary (28 April 2016), in PowerPoint form, can be found here: [http://www.cenbet.org.my/documents/CENBET%20Presentation\\_Mar17\\_2016\\_Final.pptx](http://www.cenbet.org.my/documents/CENBET%20Presentation_Mar17_2016_Final.pptx). CENBET commissioned market research company Anderson Market Analytics to run the survey (<http://www.cenbet.org.my/ViewStatement.aspx?Id=2156>).

<sup>3</sup> For example, answering "No" to the question, "Would you consider voting for a candidate of another race in an election?" is interpreted as evidence of racism. However, respondents may envisage a range of scenarios besides racial prejudice – which cannot be discounted, but neither should it exclusively account for the results. "A candidate of another race" to some respondents may be taken to mean candidate of another political party, or may be approached from the perspective of having one's ethnic and religious interests represented, which does not necessarily entail antipathy toward other ethnic groups.

<sup>4</sup> Ananthi Al Ramiah, Miles Hewstone and Ralf Wölfer, *Attitudes and Ethnoreligious Integration: Meeting the Challenge and Maximizing the Promise of Multicultural Malaysia*, Final report: Survey and recommendations Presented to the Board of Trustees, CIMB Foundation, January 12, 2017 (Downloadable at: [https://www.cimbfoundation.com/clients/CIMB\\_Foundation\\_D894EB94-B114-4E11-8175-EB426BB876F0/contentms/img/pdf/attitudes-and-%20ethnoreligious-integration-survey-and-recommendations.pdf](https://www.cimbfoundation.com/clients/CIMB_Foundation_D894EB94-B114-4E11-8175-EB426BB876F0/contentms/img/pdf/attitudes-and-%20ethnoreligious-integration-survey-and-recommendations.pdf))

<sup>5</sup> TN50 is a national aspirational blueprint for 2050. Presentation slides available (in Malay) at: <http://kajidata.com/resources/2017/05/REPORT-PERPADUAN-KESEJAHTERAAN-TN50.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Various questions overly stimulate positive sentiments in respondents, such as: "To what extent do you respect other cultures besides your own?", "To what extent do you support the need for young people to intermingle regardless of colour or creed to foster a spirit of unity among Malaysian people?" Unsurprisingly, 95-97% of respondents declared support for these attitudes and objectives, but this near unanimity provides limited insight on the actual state of unity and harmony.

*Table 1. Surveys concerning ethnic relations and ethnicity-based policies*

Title of survey	Author(s)	Date and interview mode	Sample size and scope
National Unity Survey	Merdeka Center <sup>1</sup>	February – June 2015 telephone	4,352 All of Malaysia
Malaysian Political Values Survey		January – April 2010 telephone	3,000 All of Malaysia
Are Malaysians Racist?	CENBET <sup>2</sup>	Early 2016 face-to-face	1,056 Peninsular Malaysia
Attitudes and ethnoreligious integration	Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer <sup>3</sup>	September – October 2016 face-to-face	1,504 Peninsular Malaysia
People’s perceptions of unity and harmony	Kajidata <sup>1</sup>	March 2017 telephone	1,025 All of Malaysia

Notes:<sup>1</sup> Opinion/market research companies;<sup>2</sup> Civil society organisation;<sup>3</sup> Project funded by CIMB Foundation, survey administered by Merdeka Center.

## **ETHNIC RELATIONS: FAULT LINES AND COMMON GROUND**

What do these surveys tell us about ethnic relations? The findings can be collated and synthesized thematically. By no means is this a comprehensive analysis, and we remain mindful of the differences in focus and sample of each survey, but we may nonetheless distil a few distinct and important insights.

First, Malaysians interact amiably across ethnic lines, and generally harbour goodwill and support the idea of integration, but rarely forge close friendships outside of their own ethnic group. MC’s (2015) investigation focused on interpersonal contact; a majority of respondents report meeting “fairly frequently” with people of different ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> AHW finds that for most respondents, their circle of good friends is predominantly confined to their ethnic group, a pattern more acutely observed within the Malay population.<sup>8</sup>

These outcomes are not necessarily a result of choice, and do not directly entail awkwardness or unease toward other groups. Demographic factors significantly cause

<sup>7</sup> 42% meet with a person of different ethnicity every day, 17% several times a week, and 15% several times a month (MC 2015).

<sup>8</sup> To the question “What proportion of your good friends are (Malaysia/Chinese/Indian)?”, respondents were to rate their answers from 1 (none or very few) to 5 (almost all or all). On average, the rating for friends of the same group was about 4 for Chinese and Indians and 4.5 for Malays, and with regard to friends of other ethnicities, ratings were close to or just under 2 for Malays and Chinese, and about the range 2.3-2.8 for Indians.

Malays, as the majority group, to be more likely to cross paths and forge friendships with each other, especially in ethnically homogeneous rural communities. Indians, who among Peninsular Malaysia's main ethnic groups are the least likely to live and work in predominantly Indian surroundings, report the highest share of friends outside their group. Indeed, when AHW investigates respondents' sentiments toward mixing with other groups, they find low levels of "intergroup anxiety".<sup>9</sup> Kajidata captures similar positive dispositions, with 96% of respondents indicating they encourage their children and family members to befriend people of other ethnicities.

These findings underscore contrasting images of Malaysia widely articulated in popular and academic discourses, of a country enjoying broad social cohesion with neither open animosity nor close integration, where people interact but do not necessarily embrace, and where society is animated by enmity on some issues and conviviality on others.<sup>10</sup> Further demonstrating these multiple facets, AHW finds considerable support for diversity in living spaces, with 60% of Malays, 70% of Chinese and 78% of Indians agreeing with the creation of more racially mixed neighbourhoods, but also broad support for preserving separate schooling streams, which are constituted by language or religion and are overwhelmingly ethnically homogeneous. Views starkly converge by ethnicity, with only 20% of Chinese agreeing with the idea of dissolving vernacular education, compared to 47% of Indians and 60% of Malays. Kajidata reports 75% favour multiple streams of education, including vernacular language schools, and presumably religious and boarding schools as well, and 47% oppose merging these schools into one system.

This dynamic of surface serenity and underlying tensions comes across as well in the surveys' second major insight on ethnic relations: attitudes and perceptions matter, and can sow presumption and division – but more friendship and knowledge builds bridges. MC (2015) notes that those who interact more cross-culturally also indicate a greater understanding of other cultures. Again, AHW is particularly instructive, by looking at how favourably Malaysians view the ethnic group and religion they identify with, compared to others' ethnicities and religions. The survey encouragingly finds that those with more friendships and more positive experiences outside their group tend to hold more favourable views of other groups.

However, striking disparities surface on religious fronts. Muslims register a substantial differential between favourability ratings of their own religion (90 per 100) versus other religions (40 and below), in contrast to Buddhists and Hindus, who on average rate their religion at about 70 while ascribing a score of 50 to other religions. These rather unfavourable views of others prevail despite respondents reporting a negligible amount of negative real-life encounters with persons of other religions. Assessment of religious knowledge, through testing respondents' on basic tenets of each faith, reveals an unwholesome information deficit vis-à-vis other religions, which is most pronounced

---

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, on the extent to which they are uncomfortable or nervous about mixing with people of different ethnicity, all groups' ratings are well under 2 (on a scale of 1 – 5).

<sup>10</sup> MC (2015) posed the question directly and broadly, asking respondents to rate the level of inter-ethnic harmony in their neighbourhoods. The vast majority considered Malaysia harmonious, with 75% rating ethnic harmony as good or very good, and 90% reporting no observation of ethnic or religious incidents. 13% deemed ethnic relations had remained the same, and only 6% selected "bad".

among Muslim respondents. On the whole, therefore, religion arguably presents a major barrier to national integration, and this is an area where change of attitude and perception, and increase of knowledge, are especially important.

## **BUMIPUTERA PREFERENTIAL POLICIES AND ETHNICITY-BASED POLITICS: IT'S COMPLICATED**

The surveys' findings on policies and politics delineated by ethnicity substantiate two important insights. First, Malaysians are distinctly divided on Bumiputera preferential policies and the fairness of the economic system, with the majority firmly in favour of its continuity and deeming the system as fair, and minority groups showing widespread misgivings and perceiving unfairness. Public opinion toward Malay preferential policies is a popular subject, reflected in its coverage in these surveys. CENBET poses the question more provocatively and ambiguously: "Are race-based policies still relevant today?" On the whole, fewer answer in the positive than negative (38% selected "Yes", 48% "No"). However, Malay respondents are evenly split (42% each disagreeing and disagreeing), while among Chinese, 60% are against and only 28% are supportive. Indian responses are in between, with 52% disagreeing with the question, and 34% agreeing.

AHW frames the issue in terms that possibly allow respondents to more clearly grasp the question's context. On a scale of 1 to 5, in terms of the level of comfort with Malays receiving special privileges, Malays average almost 4 per 5, Chinese slightly below 2, Indians slightly above 2. Less than half of Malay respondents (47%), but overwhelmingly more Chinese (85%) and Indians (88%), agree with the introduction of "fair competition for everyone so that no one group gets special privileges".

Undoubtedly, the view of the majority Malay/Bumiputera is pivotal, and a focal point within some survey reports. MC (2010) conveys responses from its Malay/Bumiputera sample on questions surrounding preferential assistance. Support is robust, with 73% agreeing with the stance: "Malays/Bumiputeras need all the help they can get to move ahead so programs like the NEP should be welcome." The contrasting view, as expressed in the statement "Assistance such as the NEP doesn't help Malays/Bumiputeras in long run as it makes them dependent", is closer to the opinion of only 21%. Similarly, 59% hold that "As the original inhabitants of this country, Malays/Bumiputeras should continue to be accorded with special rights and privileges", while 40% assent that "People should be treated and accorded the same rights in Malaysia regardless of race or religion." This high level of support concurs with AHW, who also find that, more broadly, the extent to which groups feel their interests fairly represented varies, with Malays feeling protected and fairly treated substantially more than Chinese and Indians.<sup>11</sup> MC (2015) finds group differences in assessment of the economic system's fairness in giving opportunity to succeed, notably with

---

<sup>11</sup> Specifically, a considerably higher proportion of Malays than Chinese and Indians regard that their group interests are protected by the government, and perceive economic policies as fair. Not surprisingly, Chinese indicate a higher interest in emigrating.

a slight majority of Muslim Bumiputeras considering the system fair, but a sizable majority of non-Muslim Bumiputeras deeming the system unfair.<sup>12</sup>

A caveat must be registered here, to clarify some limits to the findings and to temper interpretations and policy prescriptions. Bumiputera preferential policies span a very wide range – from secondary schooling to higher education, employment, government contracting and business development – which necessitates sectoral considerations and cautions against undue generalization. Notions of fairness vary, as illustrated by the findings reported above. A majority of the Bumiputera population benefit from preferential access to post-secondary education and university, small business assistance, and similar programmes with wide catchment. Positive disposition toward these policies assuredly stems in large part from the programmes' extensive reach and tangible benefits.<sup>13</sup> The NEP is also unpopularly associated with elite enrichment, through other programmes within the Bumiputera preferential regime, such as contracting, licensing and wealth transfers. With so many possible associations with broad terms such as Malay special privileges, 'race-based policies', or 'the NEP', it is untenable to derive sweeping conclusions that Malaysians approve or reject the system as a whole. More constructive and substantive future dialogues need to be sector-specific and allow for the possibility that some Bumiputera preferential programmes are supported, chiefly in education and capability-building programmes, while others may be less acceptable. The existing surveys are inadequate to address this multiplicity of policy interventions and implications.<sup>14</sup>

The surveys' second noteworthy finding on ethnicity-based policies and politics concerns the importance of not conflating the two – and of not presuming that disaffection with ethnic parties equates with denunciation of ethnicity-based policies. Malaysia's brand of ethnicity-based policies coexist with ethnicity-based politics – most saliently, in the form of the dominant Malay party UMNO and various ethnically constituted partners in the ruling BN coalition. There are reasonable ideological and intellectual grounds to reject both simultaneously. Empirically, Malaysian society is highly complicated and not neatly aligned.

---

<sup>12</sup> Group by group, the consideration of the economic system as fair vs. unfair is dividing in the following way: Malays (46%, 46%), Muslim Bumiputera (38%, 42%), non-Muslim Bumiputera (33%, 58%), Chinese (9%, 85%), Indians (29%, 67%).

<sup>13</sup> The constitutional authorization for Bumiputera preferential programmes under Article 153, and politicization of these provisions to rally popular support, undoubtedly pervade this issue, but lie beyond this article's scope. Omission of this socio-political aspect, however, does not negate the impact of the policies' extensive reach on its popular reception.

<sup>14</sup> The quality of survey questions also leaves room for improvement. People are predisposed to respond positively to the notion of "colour blind" policies, particularly when it comes to distribution of services and education, and may thus even overlook the coexistence of ethnic preference. As an illustration, Kajidata posed a question that is rather self-contradictory. Its survey inquired on "support for the government's efforts to provide scholarships to people of one's ethnicity regardless of colour or creed". The statement presents the scenario of providing scholarships to a distinct group, yet it claims provision regardless of colour. The insertion of the phrase "regardless of colour or creed", however, would evoke positive sentiments, and possibly augment the approval rating for the statement. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain what the 82% are agreeing with: policies that protect one's ethnicity, or the amenable notion of allocating benefits "regardless of colour or creed"?

The surveys clearly show that attitudes toward ethnicity-based politics do not translate into identical attitudes toward ethnicity-based policies. AHW asks whether “all political parties should be racially mixed”, to which 62% of Malays responds affirmatively, along with 80% of Chinese and 83% of Indians. All three ethnic groups do not lean in the same direction when it comes to Malay privileges, as noted above. A Merdeka Center survey of youths, conducted in December 2004 but still pertinent given the endurance of these public opinions, stands out for directly asking questions on both ethnic preferential policies and ethnic politics. Clear majorities of Malaysia’s young adult welcome alternatives to ethnic political parties – and defend the continuation of Malay preferential policies.<sup>15</sup>

Malaysians clearly value political representation of communal interests and concerns. MC (2015) finds this cutting across both the ethnic party-dominated ruling BN coalition and the federal opposition coalition comprised of more ideologically constituted parties. 38% of respondents agreeing with the statement that one’s “communal group should be united under BN to ensure their survival into the future”, while 42% are more aligned with: “more room should be given to opposition party to voice the community’s interest”. In other words, even if parties are not based on ethnicity, they are expected to represent ethnic groups’ interests – presumably, including Bumiputera preferential policies.

When it comes to the highest office, public opinion weighs against a non-Malay occupying that seat. Surveys have reported this on exclusively Malay/Bumiputera subsamples, not the entire sample. CENBET finds that, among Malays, 71% will not accept a non-Malay as Prime Minister. Likewise, MC (2015) finds that Malays are largely not ready to accept a non-Malay as Prime Minister, while they are comfortable with non-Malay neighbours, schoolmates, business partners and physicians. There is considerable support for politics to shift to modes of organisation and interaction that look beyond ethnicity, while when it comes to the Prime Ministership, a momentous majority reserve that position for a Malay, possibly due to concerns that community and religion will not be adequately protected by a non-Malay.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The insights distilled from the surveys reveal fissures in Malaysian society that limit or threaten its cohesion and integrity, while suggesting some glimmers of promise that the nation can progress toward its goal of national unity. There is a plethora of information that can be gleaned from these publicly available resources.

---

<sup>15</sup> Merdeka Center – New Straits Times Youth Expectations Survey of December 2004, comprised of 852 respondents aged 16-30 years, reported opinions toward retaining and removing the following policies or practices:

- Removing ethnicity based political parties: 39% retain; 55% remove.
- Preference to Malays in getting government assistance: 59% retain; 39% remove
- A quota system for public university admissions: 52% retain; 42% remove

A summary of findings is downloadable at:

<http://www.merdeka.org/v4/index.php/downloads/category/2-researches?download=108:nst-youth-poll-presentation-1&start=20>.

Looking forward, two concluding thoughts may be added to the key insights discussed in this article. First, the importance of not just interaction, but also friendship, knowledge and appreciation of other ethnicities, cultures and religions, comes across emphatically. Second, on the issue of ethnicity in policy and politics, division and complexity reigns in Malaysia, and the situation calls for more fine-grained surveys and analyses.

<p><b>ISEAS Perspective</b> is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614</p> <p>Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn and Benjamin Loh</p>
---	--	---