

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Johor Survey 2017: Views on Identity, Education and the Johor Royal Family**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- A recent survey of registered voters in Johor reflect strong but not exclusive identification with Johor, support for a return to English-medium schooling and positive views of the Johor Royal Family.
- 88 per cent of all respondents identify with *Bangsa Johor*, with Chinese respondents registering the highest identification (90.5 percent), followed by the Malays (88.2 percent) and Indians (81.7 percent). For all groups, regional identity is ranked lower than national and religious identities.
- The majority of Malay respondents view themselves as Muslim (56.5 percent) first. While 31.8 percent of Indian and 16.1 percent of Chinese respondents identify with their ethnicity, only 2.2 percent Malay respondents identify themselves as Malay.
- The survey finds that a majority of all respondents in the state (82 percent) support bringing back public English-medium schools. Predictably, 87.1 percent of Malay respondents endorse the “One School for All” concept. Surprisingly, the concept also receives strong support from Chinese (74.4 percent) and Indians (67.1 percent).
- Generally, respondents are positive about the Johor Royal Family. They agree that the Johor Sultan looks after the personal interests of citizen, is a good guardian of Islam, and think that he should intervene in politics when necessary. Results were more mixed on the question whether Johor royalty should refrain from business ventures.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sultan Ibrahim Ismail Ibni Almarhum Sultan Iskandar was installed as the 5<sup>th</sup> Sultan of modern Johor on 23 January 2010 following the death of his father Sultan Iskandar Ibni Almarhum Sultan Al-Khalidi. His ascension to the throne came at a time when the declining support for the long-ruling coalition led by United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), at the last two general elections, 2008 and 2013, has left a political vacuum in the country. True to form, a relatively weakened UMNO-led government opened up opportunities for the nine traditional rulers to “assume a more visible role in the country’s political life”,<sup>1</sup> albeit only with tacit support from the political elite. The dynamic and entrepreneurial Sultan Ibrahim has arguably been the most outspoken of the rulers on various national issues. Also, the Sultan has been conspicuously pro-active on Johor state matters.

The Johor royal family, especially Sultan Ibrahim and his son, the Tunku Mahkota (Crown Prince) of Johor, Tunku Ismail Idris, has been very critical of the growing racial and religious polarization in the country.<sup>2</sup> Sultan Ibrahim has also expressed his concern over the growing “Arabisation” of Islam and the rise of “conservative” Islam among Malaysian Muslims.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Malay chauvinist groups such as Perkasa and the “Redshirts”,<sup>4</sup> and Muslim preachers whose teachings are “against those professed by the Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah”<sup>5</sup> were banned in Johor from organizing public gatherings and teaching or preaching, respectively. Racism and “conservative” Islam are, the Sultan insists, contradictory to the inclusive *Bangsa Johor* identity that embraces multiculturalism and racial and religious tolerance. Consequently, Sultan Ibrahim has actively encouraged Johoreans, and Malaysians in general, to emulate *Bangsa Johor* in part as an antidote to the polarization trends in the country.<sup>6</sup>

The Sultan has also been outspoken on various aspects of education in the country. He supports abolishing the existing multi-stream school system because it does not facilitate inter-ethnic mixing since the vast majority of Malay, Chinese and, to some extent, Indian

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<sup>1</sup> Francis E. Hutchinson and Vandana Prakash Nair. *The Johor Sultanate: Rise or Re-emergence? Trends in Southeast Asia* #16, 2016. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Stop using race, religion to hide incompetence, Johor sultan tells politicians’, *The Malaysian Insider* 28 December 2015. <http://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/stop-using-race-religion-hide-incompetence-johor-sultan-tells-politicians>.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Stop aping Arabs, Johor Sultan tells Malays’, *MalayMail Online* 24 March 2016 <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/stop-aping-arabs-johor-sultan-tells-malays#iw5rGDy3s37pCqmS.97>

<sup>4</sup> ‘Those who practise hatred and racism have no place in Johor’, *The Star Online* 17 September 2015. <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/09/17/sultan-ibrahim-get-out-those-who-practise-hatred-and-racism-have-no-place-in-johor/>

<sup>5</sup> ‘Johor bans 16 religious speakers from giving talks, preaching in Johor’, *The Star Online* 3 February 2016. <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/02/03/johor-16-speakers-banned/>

<sup>6</sup> ‘Bangsa Johor concept now more relevant than ever, says Johor ruler’, *The New Straits Times* 30 August 2016 (<https://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/08/169238/bangsa-johor-concept-now-more-relevant-ever-says-johor-ruler>)

students are enrolled in their respective language schools.<sup>7</sup> The multi-stream school system should be replaced by a single-stream education system to foster national unity. Sultan Ibrahim strongly recommends modelling the single-stream education after the Singapore school system that consistently ranks among the best in the world and which, he maintains, has successfully fostered national unity, provided high quality students, and produced graduates competent in the English language.

Besides actively promoting *Bangsa Johor* to residents in the state, the Sultan has also weighed in on various issues and policies pertaining to the state.<sup>8</sup> For example, to mark his 59<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations, Sultan Ibrahim launched an affordable housing scheme for Johor residents.<sup>9</sup> He has also insisted on being consulted on the two major infrastructure projects in the state, namely the Rapid Transit System (RTS) Link between Malaysia and Singapore and the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High Speed Rail.<sup>10</sup> Most recently, Sultan Ibrahim has introduced a meeting every Wednesday with top state officials to deliberate on developments in the state.<sup>11</sup>

It can be confidently argued that Sultan Ibrahim is perhaps the most entrepreneurial of all the current rulers in the country today. Since becoming Sultan, he has been actively investing and participating in a number of business ventures, especially in property. He has sold large tracts of land worth hundreds of millions of dollars to companies from China, as well as formed partnerships with Johor companies to develop property projects, especially in Johor.<sup>12</sup> He is now the second largest individual shareholder in Berjaya Asset Berhad, a major holding company with interests in property, consumer market, resorts, gaming and lottery, telecommunications, education and others.<sup>13</sup> With a net worth estimated at between \$1.4 billion and \$1.6 billion dollars,<sup>14</sup> Sultan Ibrahim is arguable one of the richest men in Malaysia.

This paper examines the results of a survey commissioned by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and conducted by the Merdeka Center. The topics covered in this paper are on

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<sup>7</sup> ‘English, the universal currency’, *The Star Online* 12 June 2015.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/06/12/english-the-universal-currency/>

<sup>8</sup> See Hutchinson and Nair 2016.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Sultan’s birthday gift of affordable homes to Johoreans’, *The Star Online* 21 March 2017.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/03/21/sultans-birthday-gift-of-affordable-homes-to-johoreans/>.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Johor Sultan expresses serious reservations over Rapid Transit System Link design and proposed bridge’, *The Straits Times* 8 August 2017. <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/johor-sultan-expresses-serious-reservations-over-rt-link-design-and-proposed-bridge>.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Johor Sultan sets Wednesdays aside for briefings on state affairs’, *The Straits Times* 5 October 2017. <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/johor-sultan-sets-wednesdays-aside-for-briefings-on-state-affairs>.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Land sale by Johor Sultan sets record prices’, *The Edge Weekly* Issue #992, December 9– 5, 2013. <http://realestatesmalaysia.blogspot.sg/2013/12/land-sale-by-johor-sultan-sets-record.html>.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Johor Sultan now second largest individual shareholder in Berjaya Assets’, *Malaymail Online* October 2, 2017. <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/money/article/johor-sultan-now-second-largest-individual-shareholder-in-berjaya-assets#WktZwxh4x6W8Y8ey.97>.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Sultan of Johor flies in by gold jet to the Golden State’, *The Australian* August 12, 2016. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/state-politics/sultan-of-johor-flies-in-by-gold-jet-to-the-golden-state/news-story/e07daad276857496fa30512193dbac69>.

respondents’ views on *Bangsa Johor* and their self-identification in terms of national and regional identity, ethnicity, religious affiliation, the question of *Satu Sekolah Untuk Semua* (One School for All), the introduction of public English-medium schools, and attitudes toward the Johor Royal family.

**METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE**

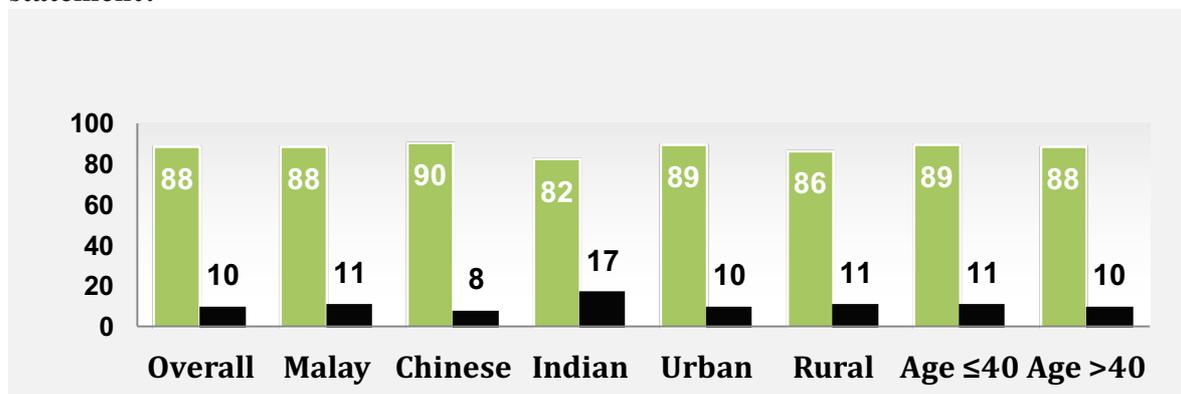
The survey was conducted in May and June 2017. A sampled 2,011 respondents were interviewed via fixed-line and mobile phones. Respondents consisted of Malaysian citizens aged 18 and above who resided in Johor. They were selected on the basis of random stratified sampling across district of residence, controlled by quota for ethnicity, age and gender. A ‘Johor resident’ is defined as one who is registered as a voter in the state.

There were 1104 (55 percent) ethnic Malay respondents, 758 (38 percent) ethnic Chinese respondents, and 149 (7 percent) ethnic Indian respondents. 340 respondents were between the ages of 21-30 years old; 455 respondents were between the ages of 31-40 years old; 546 respondents were between the ages of 41-50 years old; 409 respondents were between the ages of 51-60 years old; and 261 respondents were 61 years old and above. The survey’s estimated margin of error is +2.18.

**PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY**

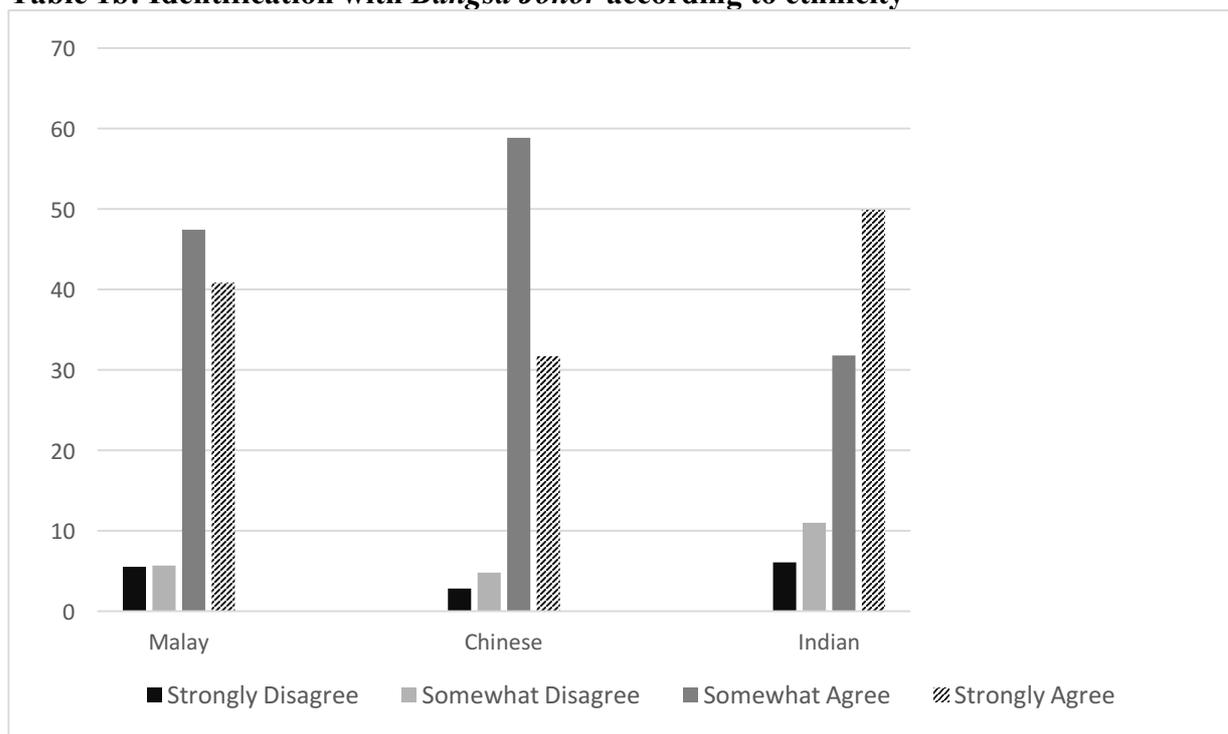
When asked if they identify with *Bangsa Johor*, 88 per cent of all respondents say they did. The strong identification with *Bangsa Johor* is uniform across all demographic segments (Table 1a). This attitude was consistent across all ethnic groups, with the Chinese at 90.5 percent, the Malays at 88.2 percent and the Indians 81.7 percent. Also, 49.9 percent of Indian respondents strongly identify with *Bangsa Johor*, followed by Malay respondents at 45.8 percent and Chinese respondents at a much lower 31.7 percent (Table 1b). Among Chinese respondents, 58.8 percent somewhat agree with identifying with *Bangsa Johor*.

**Table 1a. “I identify with Bangsa Johor”. How far do you agree or disagree with this statement?**



Note: The grey bar denotes “Agree” and the back bar “Disagree”.

**Table 1b: Identification with *Bangsa Johor* according to ethnicity**



However, although 88 percent of all respondents identify with *Bangsa Johor*, nevertheless only 14 percent see themselves as *Bangsa Johor* first; compared to 39 percent identifying themselves firstly as Malaysian citizen and 33 percent on the basis of religious affiliation (Table 2a). Only respondents who identify themselves with their ethnicity first, at 10 percent, are less than those who identify themselves as *Bangsa Johor* first. In other words, respondents in Johor do not display a strong regional identity, unlike in the states of Sabah and Sarawak.

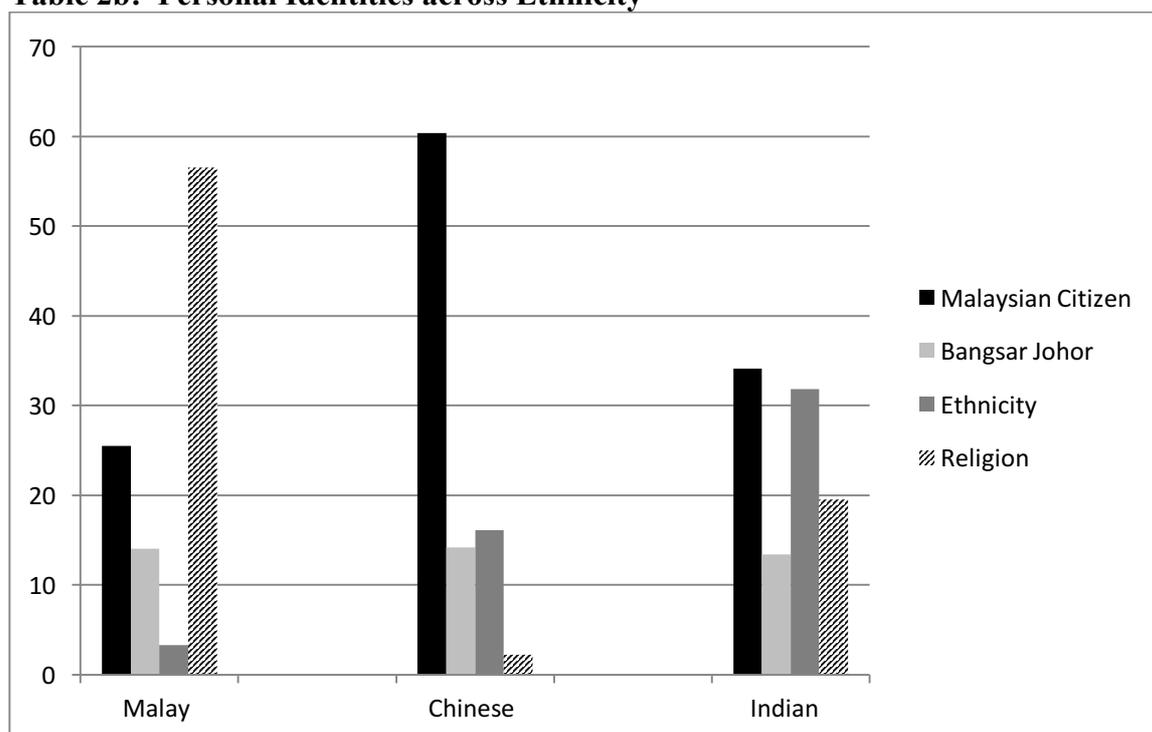
**Table 2a: Rank the following identities according to personal relevance.**

Identities	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<b>Malaysian citizen</b>	<b>39%</b>	23%	19%	13%
Bangsa Johore	14%	<b>37%</b>	28%	12%
Ethnicity (Malay, Chinese, Indian, others)	10%	19%	<b>26%</b>	34%
Religion (Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, others)	33%	13%	15%	<b>27%</b>

Consistent with the trend of increasing Islamic awareness among Malays throughout the peninsula, 56.5 percent of Malay respondents in Johor identify with their religious affiliation first (Table 2b). 25.5 percent of Malay respondents see themselves as Malaysian citizen first (25.5 percent), *Bangsa Johor* (14.3 percent) first and Malay first (only 3.3

percent). In contrast, only 2.2 percent of Chinese and 19.5 percent of Indian respondents identify themselves based on religious affiliation first. The majority of Chinese and Indian respondents identify themselves as Malaysian first, at 60.4 percent and 34.1 percent respectively. Significantly, Indian respondents who identify themselves with ethnicity first register a high 31.8 percent while only 16.1 percent of Chinese respondents identify themselves in that manner.

**Table 2b: Personal Identities across Ethnicity**



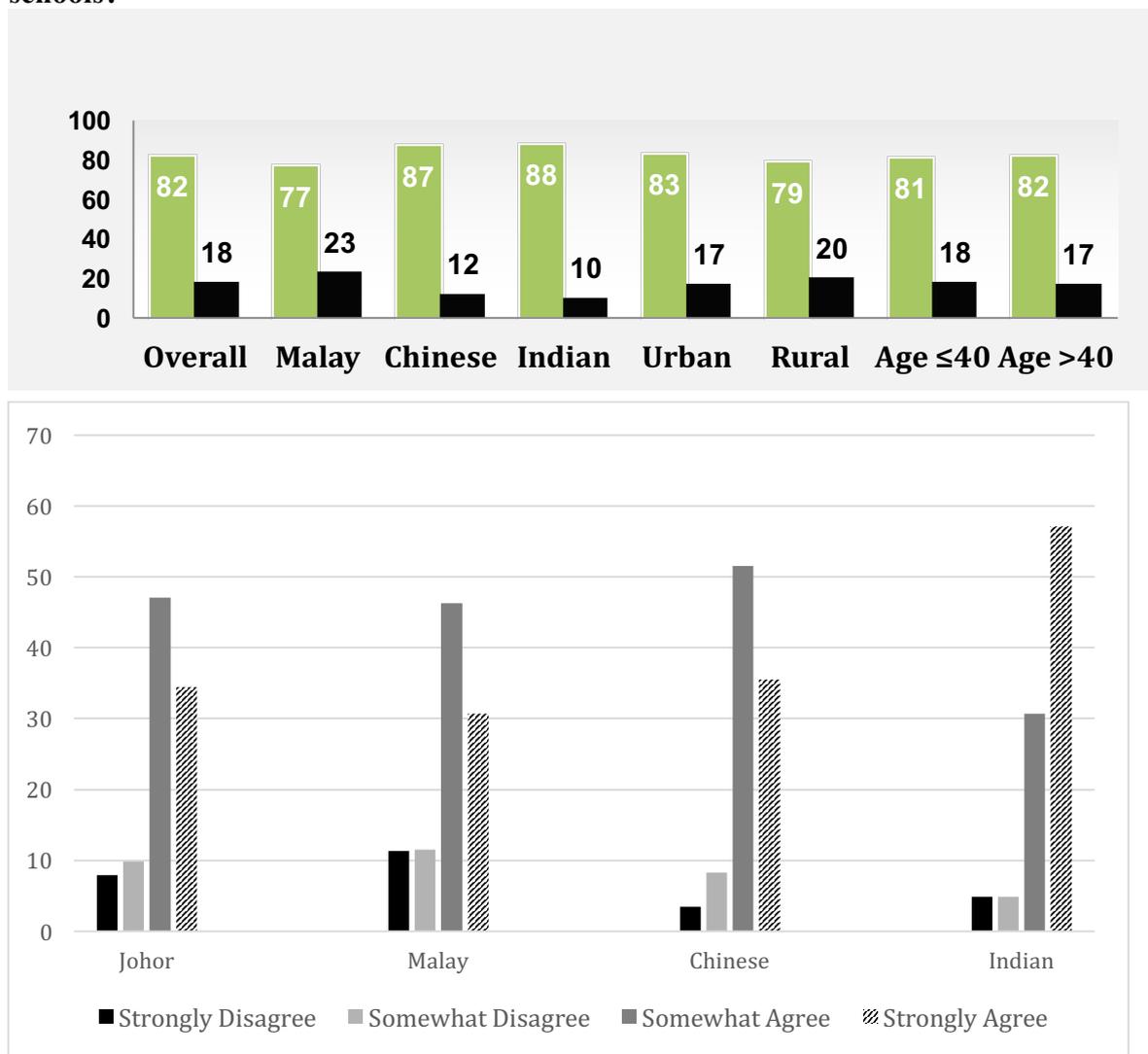
## INTRODUCTION OF PUBLIC ENGLISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS<sup>15</sup>

The survey found that a majority of all respondents in the state (82 percent) support bringing back public English-medium schools. This support is strong across all demographic segments, even among Malay and rural respondents who in the past were not that supportive of the policy to teach mathematics and science in English (Table 3a). Among Malay respondents, 77 percent agree and 23 percent disagree with introducing public English-medium schools. As expected, support for the introduction of public English medium schools is much higher among Chinese respondents (87 percent) and Indian respondents (88 percent). In fact, Indian respondents are the most enthusiastic with

<sup>15</sup> Malaysia started to gradually switch the medium of instruction in its national schools from English to Malay from 1968 to 1982, and with English taught as a compulsory subject at all levels. However, in 2003, then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, citing the need to improve graduates competency in English; English still being the language of business, which enhances employability and also in facilitating the acquisition and research in scientific and technical stuff; decided that the teaching of mathematics and science subjects should be to English. In 2012, however, due to a number of factors, the policy was terminated and the subjects were again taught in Malay.

57.2 percent strongly agreeing (Table 3b). Perhaps the very strong support among Johoreans for the introduction of public English-medium schools is due their cognizance of the success of Singapore’s English-medium national school system in producing graduates who are competent in English and who are internationally employable.

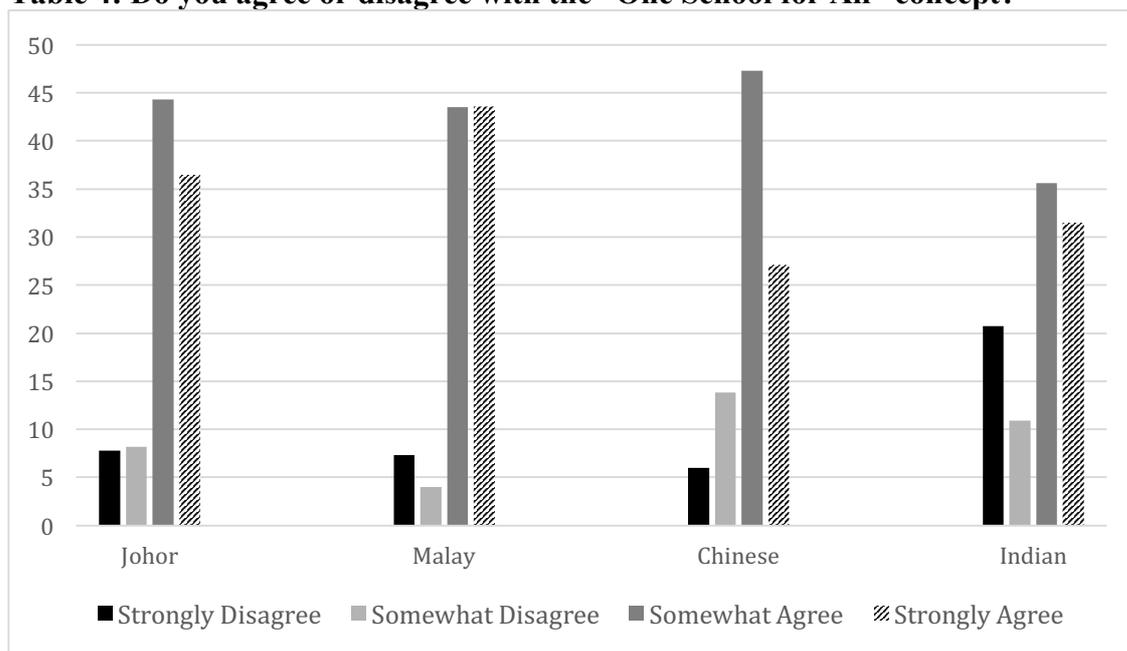
**Table 3a: Do you agree or disagree with the introduction of public English-medium schools?**



**One School for All (Satu Sekolah Untuk Semua)**

There is strong support (80.8 percent) for the “One School for All” concept (Table 4). As expected, 87.1 percent of Malay respondents agree to it. Among the Chinese, 47.3 percent somewhat agree and 27.1 percent strongly agree and nearly 20 percent do not support the concept. Indian respondents register the lowest support for the concept with 67.1 percent agreeing and 31.6 percent disagreeing. The strong support among Chinese and Indian respondents for the “One School for All” concept contradicts the prevailing belief that the majority of Indians and Chinese in the country do not support the “One School for All” concept because it would mean closing down Tamil and Chinese schools.

**Table 4: Do you agree or disagree with the “One School for All” concept?**



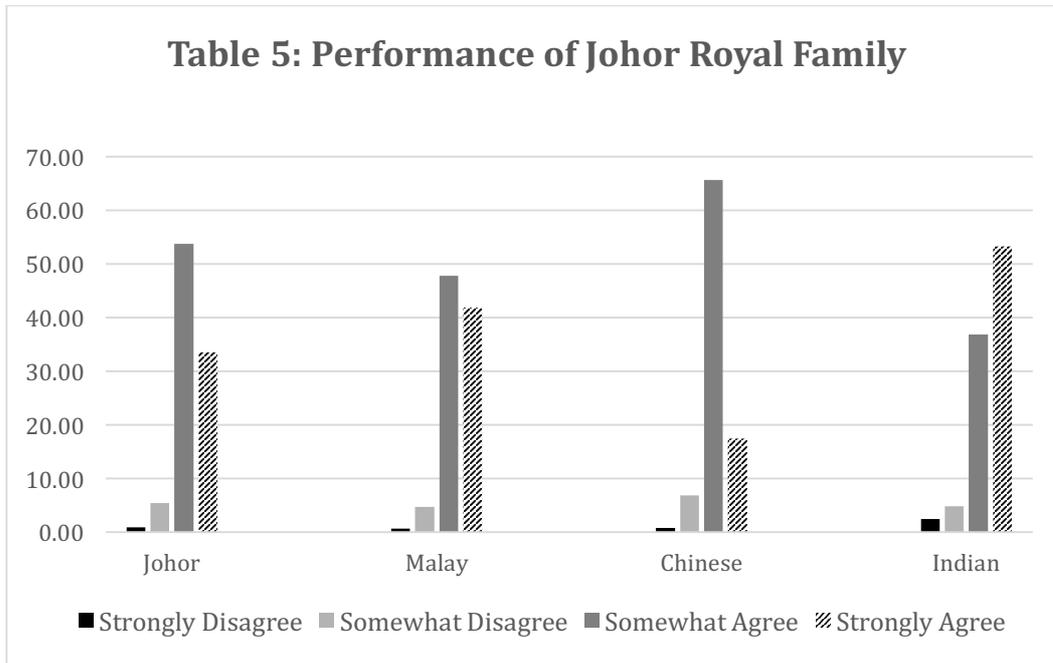
A possible explanation for the strong Chinese and Indian support in Johor may be their impression that the state will introduce a single-stream education system modelled on the Singapore English-medium school system – which the Johor Sultan has actively promoted. This question needs further investigation.

**ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE JOHOR ROYAL FAMILY**

*Performance of the Johor Royal Family<sup>16</sup>*

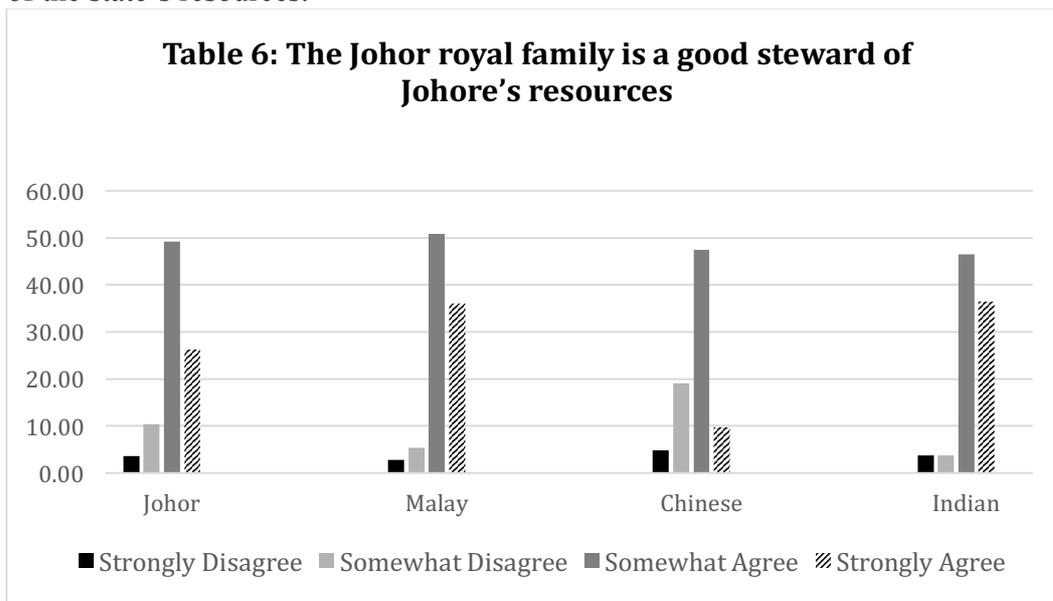
Respondents are generally satisfied with the performance of the Johor royal family: 87.3 percent report being satisfied and only 14.5 percent are dissatisfied (Table 5). Among the ethnic groups, Indian respondents are the most satisfied, with 53.3 percent declaring being very satisfied and 36.9 percent somewhat satisfied. 41.8 percent of the Malay respondents are very satisfied and 47.8 percent somewhat satisfied on the issue. Finally, 65.7 percent and 17.5 percent of Chinese respondents report being satisfied and very satisfied respectively with the royal family’s performance.

<sup>16</sup> Q37. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the performance of the Johor royal family?



*A good steward of Johor’s resources<sup>17</sup>*

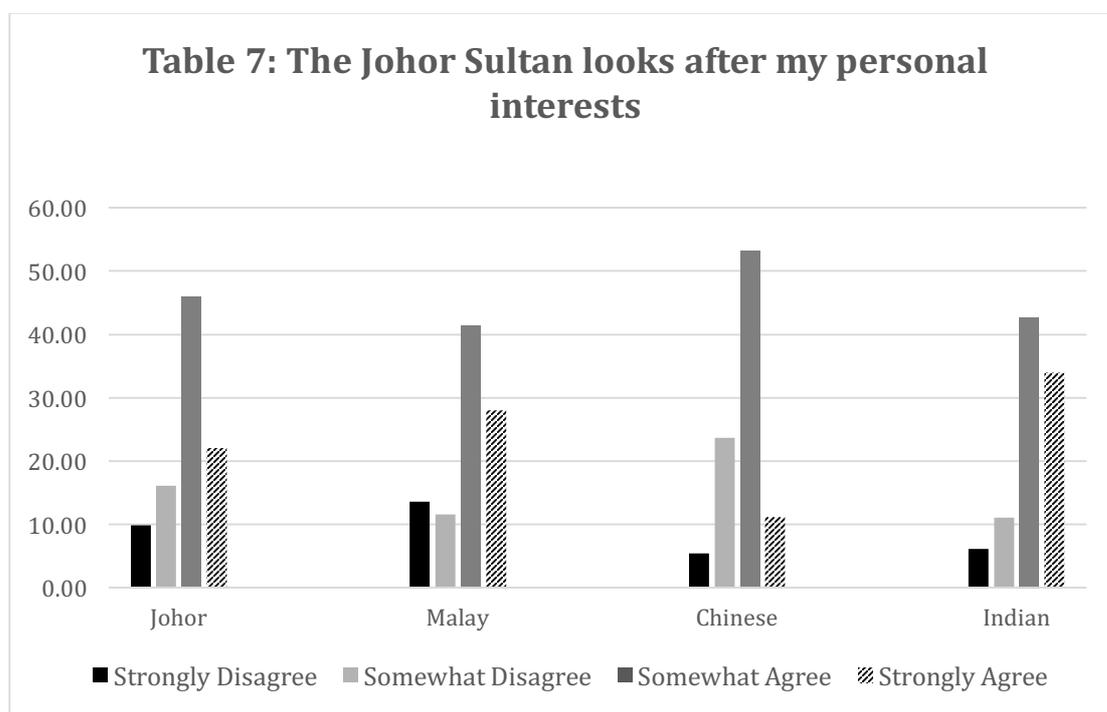
While 75 percent of all respondents agree that the Johor royal family is a good steward of the state’s resources, there is a noticeable variation across ethnicity (Table 6). 87 percent of Malay respondents and 83 percent of Indian respondents are satisfied with the royalty’s good stewardship of the state’s resources with only 8.2 percent and 7.4 percent respectively being dissatisfied. In contrast, only 57 percent of Chinese respondents are satisfied with the royalty’s stewardship of the state resources while a sizable 24 percent are not. Also, 17.2 percent of Chinese are unsure about the Johor royal family stewardship of the state’s resources.



<sup>17</sup> Q38. “The Johor royal family is a good steward of Johore’s resources”. How far do you agree or disagree with this statement?

*Johore Sultan looks after my personal interests*<sup>18</sup>

A majority of respondents across all demographic segments generally agree that the Johor Sultan looks after the personal interests of residents of the state (Table 7). Overall, 68.1 percent are satisfied and only 26 percent dissatisfied. Indian respondents are the most satisfied with 76.7 percent satisfied and only 17.1 percent dissatisfied. 69.4 percent of Malay respondents are satisfied with the Johor Sultan looking after their interests, with 25.2 percent of them indicating dissatisfaction. Chinese respondents are the least satisfied with the Johor Sultan looking after their interests, with 64.4 percent (11.2 percent strongly agree and 53.2 percent somewhat agree) reporting being satisfied and almost 30 percent dissatisfied.



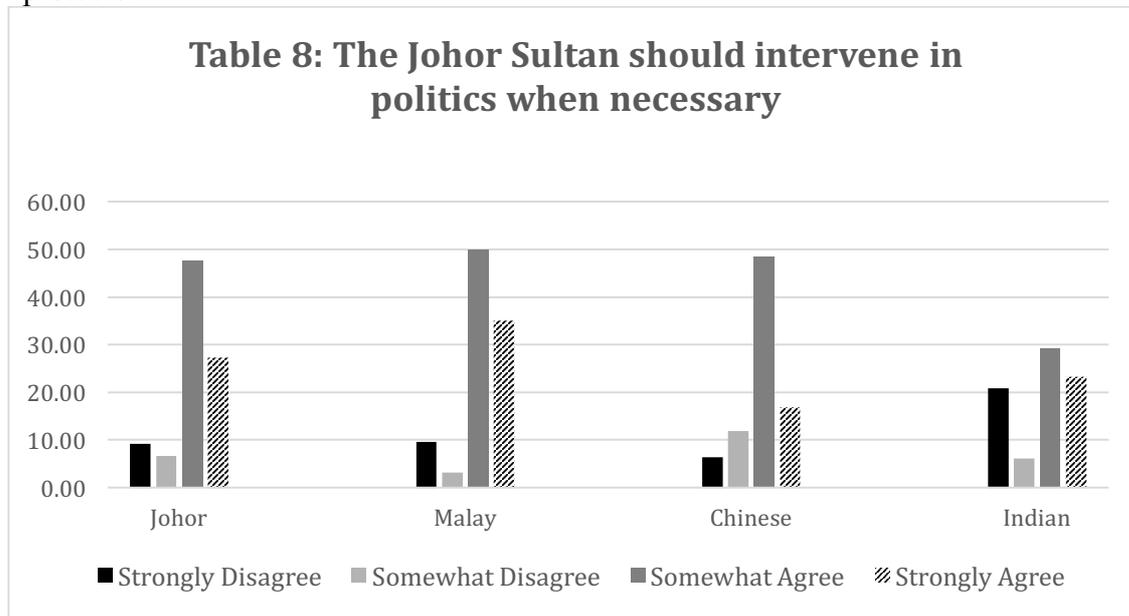
*Johore Sultan should intervene in politics when necessary*<sup>19</sup>

75 percent of all respondents felt that the Johor Sultan should intervene in politics when necessary (Table 8). The highest support comes from the Malays (84.9 percent) and the lowest support from the Indians (53.2 percent). 65.1 percent of Chinese respondents support royal intervention in politics when necessary. Conversely, 26.9 percent of Indian respondents do not agree and 14.9 percent of Chinese and 18.3 percent of Indian respondents are unsure about the Johor Sultan intervening in politics when necessary. The strong Malay support for the Johor Sultan intervention in politics when necessary is

<sup>18</sup> Q39. “The Johor Sultan looks after my personal interests”. How far do you agree or disagree with this statement?

<sup>19</sup> Q40. “The Johor Sultan should intervene in politics when necessary”. How far do you agree or disagree with this statement?

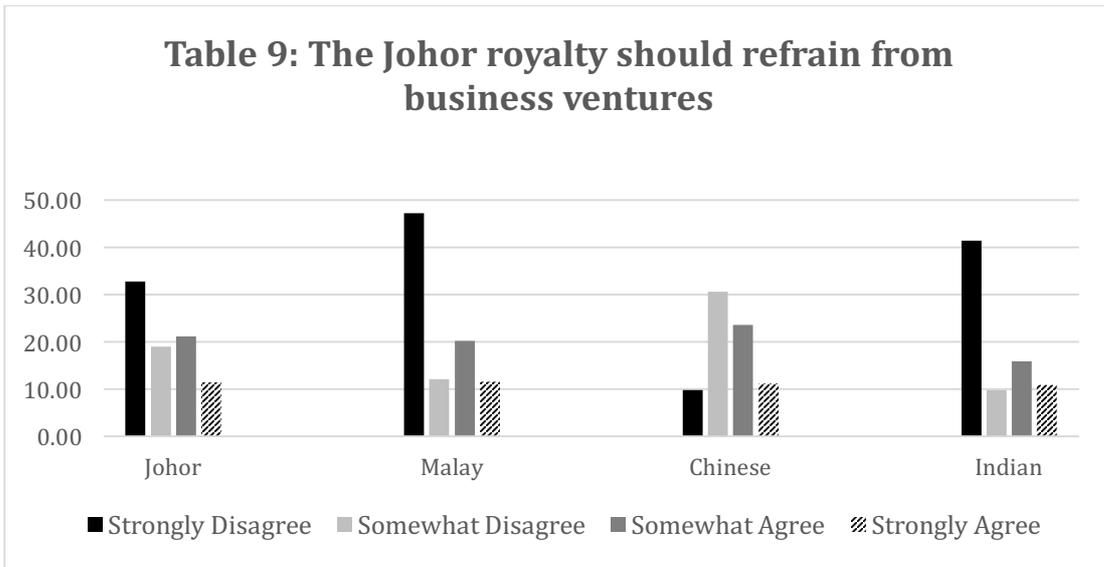
consistent with the community’s acceptance of the Sultan’s traditional role as their “protector”.



*Johor royalty should refrain from business ventures<sup>20</sup>*

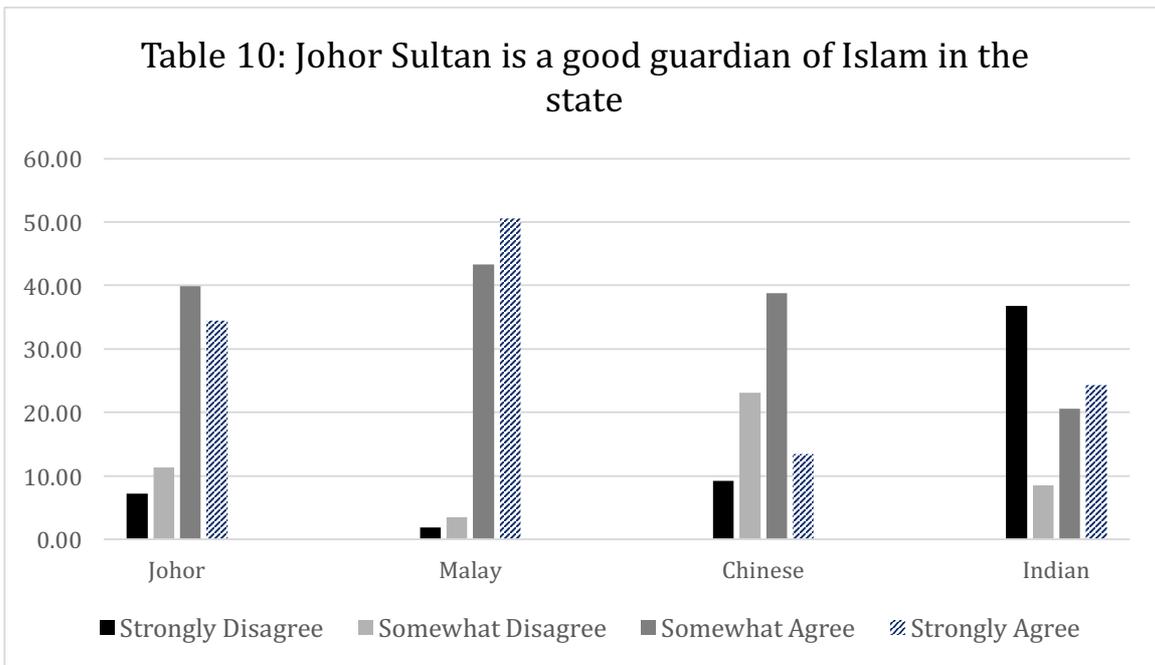
51.8 percent of the respondents disagree and 32.6 percent agree that the Johor royalty should refrain from business ventures (Table 9). Close to 59 percent of Malay and 52 percent of Indian respondents support the Johor royalty participating in business ventures. Conversely, 37.2 percent of the Malays and 26.8 percent of the Indians agree that the Johor royalty should refrain from business ventures. Among Chinese respondents, 40.5 percent disagree and 34.8 percent agree that the Johor royalty should refrain from business ventures. Finally, 18.8 percent of Chinese respondents, 19.5 percent Indian respondents, and only 6.2 Malay respondents are unsure whether or not the Johor royalty should refrain from business ventures.

<sup>20</sup> Q41. “The Johor royalty should refrain from business ventures”. How far do you agree or disagree with this statement?



*Johor Sultan is a good guardian of Islam in the state<sup>21</sup>*

Generally, a huge majority of respondents are satisfied with the Sultan’s guardianship of Islam in the state: 34.5 percent strongly agree and 39.9 percent somewhat agree with his guardianship of Islam. There is however a noticeable variation across ethnicity. On one side, the Sultan’s guardianship of Islam receives an overwhelming endorsement from the Malay respondents, with nearly 94 percent indicating their satisfaction. On another side, 45.3 percent of Indian respondents are dissatisfied with the Sultan’s guardianship of Islam compared to 44.9 percent who are satisfied. Among Chinese respondents, 52.2 percent are satisfied and 32.3 dissatisfied with the Johor Sultan’s guardianship of Islam in the state.



<sup>21</sup> Q42. “The Johor Sultan is a good guardian of Islam in the state”. How far do you agree or disagree with this statement?

## CONCLUSION

The survey finds that there is strong support for *Bangsa Johor* across all demographic segments in the state. Nevertheless, the identification with *Bangsa Johor* rank much lower than their attachment to being citizens of Malaysia. Among Malay respondents, religious affiliation is the most important while Chinese and Indian respondents identify themselves as Malaysian citizens first. The idea of introducing public English-medium schools receives overwhelming support across all ethnic groups.

While Malay respondents soundly support the ‘One School for All’ concept, the survey also shows the majority of Chinese and Indian respondents endorsing it. The respect and popularity of the Johor Royal family is confirmed by the positive endorsements from all respondents on the performance of Johor’s royal family; the Johor royal family is a good steward of Johor’s resources, Johor Sultan looks after the personal interests of the citizens, Johor Sultan should intervene in politics when necessary, and Johor Sultan is a good guardian of Islam. The question about whether the Johor royalty should refrain from business ventures, the support is slightly more than 50 percent.

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