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`Trust' tops voter wish list

Sharon Nelson

WHAT do Malaysians most want in a leader? SHARON NELSON looks at the telling results of our survey.

TRUSTWORTHINESS is the foremost quality sought by Malaysians in a leader, a nationwide poll reveals. Though it seems an obvious choice, sociologist Professor Dr Rahman Embong says it speaks well of a society trying to go beyond material progress.

The poll was commissioned by the New Straits Times and conducted by Universiti Utara Malaysia just before the dissolution of Parliament in early March.

"Amanah" (trustworthiness) occupied top spot with 62.8 per cent of Malaysians, regardless of age, race, gender, profession or locality. The other four qualities in order of preference were "mesra" (approachability), responsibility, which ranked third and fourth, and "berjiwa rakyat (the people's welfare at heart).

By throwing their weight behind trustworthiness, Rahman, of Institut Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa, says it is a demand for "noble values" necessary for any leadership.

"One concern is that material development has overtaken development in the social, intellectual and spiritual spheres."

In 1981, he says, when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over as Prime Minister the ethos was "Bersih, Cekap, Amanah".

"People responded very well to it, but as we went along it was less emphasised."

He adds that amanah was of supreme importance to Muslims because it is one of the most distinguished qualities of the Prophet.

One respondent in Perlis said he chose trustworthiness over religion because "some are so good in religion but when they are in power they do not behave the way Islam wants them to."

"People who are honest and trustworthy don't make a show of their religion. It doesn't mean that just because you are religious you can serve the people well."

A respondent in Kedah said, "Everything comes from amanah, whether you're talking about development or anything else."

In Kampung Medan, Kuala Lumpur, a neighbourhood now infamous for the violent clashes of 2001, amanah simply means keeping promises.

"We have been promised flats for 20 years, but nothing has been done," one respondent told the survey interviewer. "Our wakil rakyat only talks to us during elections."

Among middle-class Chinese in the Klang Valley, trustworthiness was interpreted as creating a stable, conducive environment for business. For middle-class Malays, it meant ensuring that resources were evenly spread, not just confined to those with certain political affiliations.

The new Key Performance Index announced by the Prime Minister earlier this week will do much to guard against poor public practice. Elected representatives will be held to high standards of ethics and conduct. Those who fail to conform will be reprimanded and risk disciplinary action, said Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The survey also indicates that across the board, Malaysians wanted their leader to be mesra or approachable.

"Help the poor people, the orang kampung," said another respondent in Kedah. "It doesn't mean you have to give us projects. Just come and speak

to us, that's enough. Visit us, talk about your family, your children. We want to talk to our leaders. Don't just come every five years."

The people of Kedah and Perlis also ranked "semangat bangsa" (communal pride) as fifth choice, which may point to a close battle in seats where outside candidates are being fielded against homegrown ones.

"Prihatin" or sensitivity made the top five in Kedah and Perlis.

"Those in lower income positions are vulnerable. They expect leadership to pay more attention to their needs and solve urgent problems, like road accessibility and electricity," says Rahman.

For state seats, Malaysians picked "good character" as the key quality that will influence their vote. This is followed closely by piety.

Interestingly, only those above 51, those in rural areas and small entrepreneurs rated higher education at all.

"Education is taken for granted because society has progressed so much," says Rahman in explaining why the other groups focused on different characteristics.

"If you had asked this question 20 years ago, then it might have been rated first or second overall. Those who don't have that much (education) don't take it for granted."

The same applies to the older group who may not have had as many opportunities as the present generation.

"But for those who do, they'll say 'Don't come and say you want to represent me if you don't have the qualifications'."

Similarly, professionals across the country said a person with vision would go some way towards snaring their votes.

"You have to have a certain level of political sophistication, so you'd find this more in metropolitan areas. If I am a lawyer, I would want to know 'do you have vision?' My representative must be visionary and understand the issues of the nation. Why should I vote a nincompoop into office?"

"You don't expect a petani (farmer) or nelayan (fisherman) to say 'must have wawasan'."

Ultimately, all these traits point back to trustworthiness, the core value stipulated by Malaysians as a whole. "Malaysians want good people with good values to be their leader. Being a leader is holding the amanah of the rakyat," says Rahman.

"There is a proverb, 'kerbau dipegang talinya, manusia dipegang katanya' (a buffalo is tethered by rope, a person by his or her word)."

And judging by the numbers, the rakyat will insist that its trust be