

28/02/2004

Feeling good about the times

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A recent survey indicates optimism about the national economy and a young generation's surprising interest in politics. ROSE ISMAIL, SHAREEM AMRY and SHARON NELSON report.

NEWS from the economic front has been especially rosy in recent days, with higher-than-expected gross domestic product figures and the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange Composite Index climbing to a four-year high.

But Malaysians were upbeat about the economy even before this: according to a national survey carried out last December, 57 per cent of respondents believed that their family's economic status would improve over the next year.

The optimism was shared across racial lines, with the Indian community only slightly less sanguine about their economic prospects. Most Malaysians also reported being satisfied with their standard of living, with 76 per cent saying that they were content with their ability to pay for needs such as housing, furniture, travel, recreation, cars and food.

Chinese respondents were the happiest, followed by the Malays. Indians, however, were split over the issue: while 52 per cent said they were satisfied, 48 per cent were either non-committal or dissatisfied.

The difference in the level of contentment between Indians and the other racial communities about standards of living was pronounced, although analysts point out that it is not necessarily the lower-income group that's feeling unhappy. Middle-class Indians - educated and informed - may be the most vocal in their dissatisfaction.

The survey polled 1,017 randomly selected people by telephone, with the sample structured according to race, gender and State.

It was conducted by the Selangor-based Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research, in collaboration with Institute Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa's two-year study of the Malaysian electoral system. The Friedrich Naumann Foundation from Germany sponsored the survey.

Despite their optimism, Malaysians said the economy remained a top concern: 12 per cent of respondents said it topped their list of national issues. This was followed by crime and public safety, and domestic political stability.

Malays generally felt more strongly about these affairs, with their attention on politics fixed primarily on the friction between Umno and Pas.

In a gender breakdown of the results, women ranked both the economy and crime on top of their list of national issues, while men fingered the economy and local politics as being most important. Female interest in the economy - traditionally a male concern - may be a reflection of their growing stake in the jobmarket and increasing financial empowerment.

Meanwhile, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's performance as Prime Minister ranked just fifth in the respondents' list of national concerns, taking only six per cent of the votes. At the time of the survey, Abdullah had only been in office for one-and-a-half months. While his inclusion in the list may have indicated the people's anxiety over the transition period from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Abdullah, the latter's low ranking in the list of national issues may be a reflection of the people's satisfaction with his performance at the time.

When asked to pinpoint issues of concern in their neighbourhood, respondents listed social problems, crime, the local economy (jobs, basic

cost of living, etc), friction between political parties and traffic and accidents in the top five.

Each racial community, however, differed from one another when asked to name their number one worry. While Malays chose social problems, and Chinese said that they fretted most about crime, Indians ranked both crime and access to education at the top of their list.

While weaknesses in the Tamil national school system is a longstanding issue, among middle-class Indians especially, this particular statistic may also indicate that the Indian community feels that many educational resources are out of its reach, both financially and logistically.

Another point of interest was how Chinese respondents expressed no concern about access to education or political friction. Their lack of interest in politics may be due to satisfaction that infighting within MCA has been resolved. But political apathy could be another reason, especially as 86 per cent of Chinese said they were not involved in any political party.

The survey also asked respondents to rank a series of economic factors according to how seriously they viewed them as problems. The list emerged as follows: household expenses, cost of education, jobs, cost of healthcare, salary squeeze, competition with China and taxes.

The inclusion of China departs from this list of otherwise domestic economic concerns, and clearly shows how the issue has captured the attention not just of economists, businessmen and politicians, but of the rakyat as well.

It's worth noting however, that on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 used to denote "Very Serious Problem", none of these issues rated higher than a 6.1.

Meanwhile, the widely-held belief that the Internet would become a viable source of news and information for Malaysians has been debunked: most people still rely on vernacular newspapers.

The survey also indicates that the different races are generally not reading each other's vernacular papers. The possibility of an information gap among Malays, Indians and Chinese is an issue that deserves further study.

* More stories on voter perceptions tomorrow.