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## Rediscovering Malaysians

By Abdul Razak Ahmad

WHAT can local public opinion polls tell us about ourselves? Plenty, as ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD discovers, especially if one reads between the lines.

THE average Malaysian's breakfast drink is coffee, tea or milo. It is no big deal unless your favourite morning beverage happens to be something much stronger, in which case you'd be in a minority.

The average Malaysian goes to bed between 10pm and 2am. Consider yourself extraordinary if you doze off before or after those hours.

Why would you want to know the traits of the average Malaysian? Because, thanks to ongoing public opinion surveys conducted by the International Islamic University of Malaysia, we can now tell you what they are.

The polls, done in July and October last year and January and April this year, are part of a series of surveys by the university's research centre. They identify Malaysians' preferences on things like our favourite sports (football) to our least liked international leader (George W. Bush).

The findings offer more than a peek into our likes and dislikes. They reveal shifts in Malaysian public opinion and offer reasons why they occur. They define where each ethnic community differs and where they hold common ground. In doing all this, the polls help tell us who we really are.

"Public opinion surveys give you a profile of Malaysians," says IIU Research Centre's dean Professor Datuk Dr Syed Arabi Idid, who coordinated the surveys.

Syed Arabi is an old hand at opinion polling. He has been conducting them since 1986, and can list some of the problems that have kept us awake at night.

"In the 1980s, Malaysians were most worried about Vietnamese migrants but the issue gradually faded from public consciousness to be replaced by concerns about domestic violence, followed by the abandoning of babies, and now, snatch thefts."

Malaysians of all races share similar sentiments on certain topics, but the polls reveal that they can also differ in other areas.

An example is when respondents were asked to identify an international leader (still living) whom they disliked most. Bush came out tops overall in all four surveys.

But when the pollsters examined the results, they discovered that a higher percentage of Malays named Bush as the leader they most disliked compared with respondents from other races. They soon realised why.

"Malays see Bush in terms of Palestine and the Iraq problem, issues close to the Malays due to their religion.

"Non-Malays do not see Bush in the same light, because Palestine and Iraq do not resonate as strongly with them," says Syed Arabi.

Differences can also be seen in the choice of favourite sporting activity. Football is the most popular overall sports among respondents, followed by badminton.

"But when we examined the results by race, we found badminton more liked by female Chinese respondents," he says.

Each ethnic community in Malaysia also relates differently to their favourite international leaders. Former South African President Nelson Mandela was a popular choice, but most of the respondents who named him were Indian. Malays, on the other hand, made up the majority who named leaders of Islamic countries.

Syed Arabi says race is unavoidable when doing local public opinion surveys.

"I can do a purely random sampling when polling in Malaysia, but eventually race will enter the picture, and you can't run away from it.

"We deal with it by asking everyone the same questions, and only separate the findings later by race, gender and age group."

Are our differences cause for concern? Syed Arabi does not think so.

"We differ on certain issues not because we are in conflict with each other, but due to our differing beliefs, religions and cultures."

Syed Arabi speaks authoritatively on race dynamics because he witnessed first-hand the disasters of ethnic conflict. He was one of the pioneer journalists with Bernama, the Malaysian national news agency. He joined in 1968 and was assigned to shadow Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in the campaign for the general election the following year.

"That assignment was a turning point in my life. I was following Tunku for nearly a month, and we were in Kedah when we found out that race riots were breaking out," he recalls.

Syed Arabi later left the profession and furthered his studies in Communications. He is now a leading local expert on public opinion surveys. His opinion poll in the run-up to the March general election this year became one of the most talked about surveys in recent times, but it also drew out the sceptics.

Some felt that local surveys like his do not reflect what's really happening. There is a suspicion that Malaysians are reluctant to say what's on their minds.

Syed Arabi addresses the issue by pointing to a growing openness after the 1999 general election. That hotly contested election saw sentiments running high following the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

"Malaysians were suddenly much more willing to say where they stood on issues, especially those relating to politics."

Syed Arabi asserts his surveys are conducted using accepted scientific norms and techniques, but that does not mean polling is all serious work and no fun.

"I like to occasionally slip in the odd 'naughty question' into the surveys; frivolous questions on what respondents had for breakfast and what time they go to bed.

"I find these questions interesting because I always enjoy finding out what a Malaysian is like," he says.

It's a process of discovery that has so far revealed that the average Malaysian possesses a surprisingly extensive knowledge of the world and what they like and don't like about it; as well as a continuing ability to transcend racial and religious differences.

The average Malaysian is turning out to be a person who may not be so average after all.

#### Highlights of April poll

\* Most liked international leader: Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (24 per cent), Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (18 per cent).

\* Least liked international leader: George W. Bush (54 per cent), Ariel Sharon (12 per cent).

\* Favourite sports: football (32 per cent), badminton (17 per cent), netball (seven per cent).

Number of respondents: 1,140 (Malays: 805, Chinese: 273, Indians and other races: 62), spread out in two electoral constituencies per State.

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