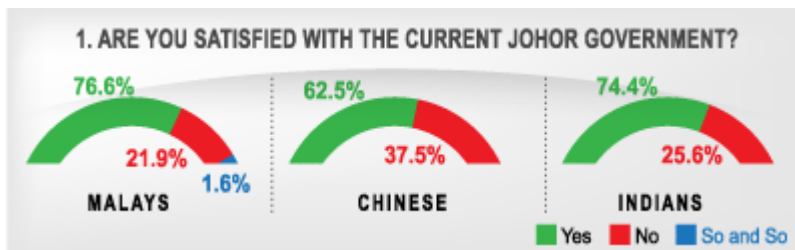


**Will 'fortress BN' fall?
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By Sheridan Mahavera**



Though some traders along historic Jalan Tan Hiok Nee have claimed that business is slow, they are happy that the state government has repaved and brightened their street in the heart of Johor Baru. To them it is an example of the positive changes brought by the BN administration for the people of Johor. — Picture by Sheridan Mahavera



KUALA LUMPUR, July 6 — It may be known as Barisan Nasional's (BN) fixed deposit in the Malay peninsula, but a recent straw poll showed that more than 30 per cent of Johoreans want Pakatan Rakyat (PR) in charge of the state and country.

Though this is low compared with other states, it could be a bellwether of how ordinary folk all over the country feel towards the ruling coalition.

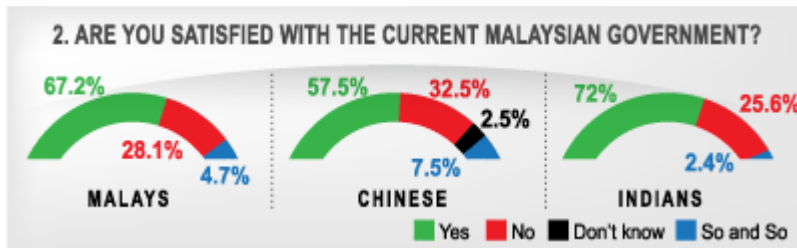
Except for Election 2008, Johoreans have always given BN near-unquestioning support. Even as the DAP and PAS won the most number of seats of any non-BN party in that year (six state and one parliament), some of their candidates also lost their election deposits campaigning in south-eastern Johor.

PR parties may boast that its increasing support is because of the tsunami's momentum and a larger national profile. The straw poll of 147 Johoreans by *The Malaysian Insider*, however suggest that it is more of a backlash against the BN for how it's managed the economy.

The fact is PR is not seen positively by many, even by those respondents who feel choked by the higher cost of food and fuel.

Though their ringgit buys them less each day, 51.7 per cent in the poll still want a BN federal government. While 49.7 per cent says they'll vote in a BN state government.

This is not blind loyalty. BN support in Johor cuts across all ethnic, gender, age and class barriers. It is reflective of the coalition's deep history in the state, the way it has shaped how Johoreans view themselves and how it is being undone by its own success.



Kampungs on fire

The anger was most acute in suburban and village areas. In Johor's western Malay heartland such as Sungai Abong, Parit Jawa and Bagan, respondents say they have watched in despair as the value of their small salaries shrink as food prices go up.

About 59.9 per cent of respondents said their most common problem was the rise of fuel and food prices. Two-thirds of that group (88 people) live in Muar, Batu Pahat and Kluang districts.

About 23km from the town of Batu Pahat, a group of men sat despondently at a makeshift nasi lemak stall on the Muar-Batu Pahat road and complained of being left behind by "orang di pusat" (federal government bureaucrats).

Most of them are day labourers in the oil palm plantations that blanket Batu Pahat's countryside.

"The price of sawit has gone down and so have our wages. When it rains, we don't see any work. But our subsidies keep getting cut. The people who make these decisions only think of themselves in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya. They don't think about us," says a 38-year-old father of two.



In rural and some urban parts of Johor, residents are struggling with high food prices and feel the government is not acting in their interests. — Picture by Sheridan Mahavera

His friend, also a plantation worker, says if the election was called tomorrow, he would give PR a try.

“I want to give them a try, see what they can do. It’s like trying new clothes. If you don’t like them, you can change them again.”

As villagers like him start scrimping on food, stalls like the one he’s patronising and the small restaurants that are a fixture of the kampung economy have also suffered.

A 37-year-old who sells snacks and drinks at Pantai Leka in Parit Jawa says he’s now the only stall left at this popular hangout famed for its assam pedas dishes.

“The guys next to me have all closed down because they could not deal with the increase in costs. I don’t know how long I’ll survive. I’m going to vote for PR next time.”

Who is this city for?

Johor Baru is undoubtedly going through an infrastructure renaissance. Mammoth multi-storied highways are magically being raised in previously congested old neighbourhoods in Pasir Gudang, Pasir Pelangi and Danga Bay.

The elite personality of Nusajaya, the new administrative centre is starting to emerge, with its international colleges, private schools, marina and exclusive gated communities.

Yet despite the euphoria over JB’s transformation, there is a feeling that much of the benefits are going to foreigners — Singaporeans who are being wooed to the manicured neighbourhoods and communities in Nusajaya.



A long-time JB resident who commutes to the island city everyday observed that many of the new upmarket homes are being snapped up by Singaporeans, especially Malays, who are moving to Malaysia but who still work in Singapore.

As Singaporeans and the Malaysians who work there drive up property prices, some JB respondents in the survey complained that it was difficult to find affordable homes in the city area or its outskirts.

If inflation in the kampungs is due to low wages, in JB it is partly because of the Singaporean dollar. The rise in goods prices was the most cited problem among JB respondents at 41.4 per cent.

Some residents complained of how some traders at the popular Larkin wet market were brazen about charging high prices for fresh food.

“When you ask them for a discount they say, if you don’t want to buy there’s always Singaporeans”, says one 47-year-old housewife.

But being flush with money is dampened by feelings of insecurity. About 24 per cent of those interviewed in JB said high crime — muggings, murders and rapes — was the biggest concern in their lives.

Despite these complaints, 17 of the 29 (or 58.6 per cent) JB residents surveyed said they would vote for BN if the election was held tomorrow. Only six of the 29 (20.7 per cent) said they would vote for PR. An equal number (6 of 29) said they are undecided.

“We want to see Najib continue because we’ve seen some good things,” says a dry goods trader on Jalan Dhoby at the centre of an old, refurbished part of JB that he says has seen a drop in business.



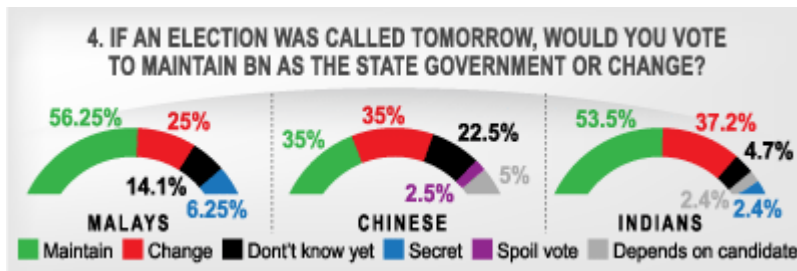
This inter change that links a main artery for traffic into Johor Baru with a new coastal highway near Pantai Lido is among the massive infrastructure projects currently going up in JB. — Picture by Sheridan Mahavera

A knock on the head

Even in the villages, those surveyed showed a deep intellectual sophistication when it comes to thinking about politics.

Whether they are petty traders, labourers, lawyers, bureaucrats or shop keepers, Johoreans seem to have the canny ability to cut through the rhetoric of PR or BN.

Though they felt they were drowning in a tide of high fuel and food prices, many did not automatically lash out at the BN.



"I don't believe the PR can manage better," stressed a roadside fried chicken seller. This was in response to the query of why if she felt things were bad, did she not consider choosing someone besides the BN to fix the country.

A guava seller a few stalls down said he had voted for PAS in the past elections but was dismayed by the Islamist party's recent change in tack.

"They had an Islamic state campaign and now it's the welfare state. But the welfare state is something Umno has done. So I don't know if I'll vote for PAS again."

This inability to countenance that someone else could replace the BN is perhaps because of the coalition's deep roots in Johor.

Not only was Umno here but almost every village branch is a mini service centre. Need musicians for your wedding? Call the Umno Youth branch chief. Need help organising a funeral? Call the branch chief. Unlike in the Northern states, the surau, the opinion generator of the Malay community is dominated by Umno officials.

It was roughly the same for MCA and MIC in the Chinese and Indian communities. After Selangor, Johor has the second largest number of MCA branches.



But over the years that kind of dominance has bred complacency. The phrase "if the BN candidate was a tree stump Johoreans will still vote for it" went from being a term of pride to being insulting.

Residents in seats which the BN lost say the incumbents and candidates were notorious for being aloof and never seen. In contrast, the PR candidates that beat them had for years built up a reputation for being active in the community.

Going by the survey's results, the BN is most likely to retain control of Johor and the state will continue to provide a stable supply of parliamentary seats.

One PR supporter, perhaps, best summed up the mood of his fellow Johoreans.

"Many are angry but it doesn't mean that we are going to overthrow the BN. The PR will be a reminder to the BN to buck up".