

Malaysia Government Approval Dives
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Malaysia's government, beset with inflation, political infighting, faltering attempts to find a missing airliner and other problems, continues to face serious headwinds in public opinion, with only 38 percent of the electorate saying the country is going in the right direction against 49 percent who say it's not, according to the latest poll by the respected Merdeka Center polling organization.

The poll of more than 1,000 voters across the country was taken between March 7 and March 20. It found that at least 15 percent of voters said the country was going "strongly in the wrong direction," primarily because of rising costs from the termination of subsidies last year for a wide variety of consumer goods including sugar, gasoline and electricity in an effort to corral the government's fiscal debt, which had come close to 55 percent of gross domestic product.

The Barisan Nasional, the ruling national coalition, lost the popular vote in the May 2013 general election, by 47.38 percent to 50.87 percent for the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition, but held onto parliament with 133 seats to 89 by dint of the first-past-the-post electoral system and extensive gerrymandering of districts.

A troubling problem is that the trend seems to be unrelievedly down. The government's popularity topped out in February 2013 at 59 percent, briefly recovered to 54 percent in September when fuel and other price hikes went into effect, and has plummeted since, to a low of 38 percent as disapproval has steadily risen. Najib became the butt of ridicule when, in discussing food prices, he said the price of *kangkung*, or morning glory, had actually fallen. Kangkung grows wild throughout Southeast Asia and is ubiquitous and cheap.

Corruption, inflation, public safety and security and affordable housing topped the list of public concerns. A strong majority of 60 percent said they were dissatisfied with Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak's attempts to rid the government of corruption, with only 8 percent saying they were "very satisfied." Another 25 percent said they were "somewhat satisfied." Of the 60 percent total, a full 33 percent said they were "very dissatisfied." An almost equal percentage said they were dissatisfied with waste in government.

As is habitual in Malaysia, ethnic Malays – the power base for the United Malays National Organization and the prime minister – gave significantly higher ratings than either ethnic Chinese or Indians, a continuing illustration of the country's uneasy racial relations. On the economy, however, the government has taken a relative beating from all three. Overall, 51 percent of voters said they were dissatisfied with the prime minister's

handling of the economy against 46 percent who were satisfied. On Najib's understanding the people's burden in facing rising costs, 57 percent said he didn't understand. Surprisingly, given the country's troubled race situation, 58 percent of voters said they approved of his handling of racial issues against 39 percent who said they didn't.

Malays score the government best, with 53 percent approval to 43 percent unfavorable. A decisive 81 percent of Chinese were critical of the handling of the economy with only 14 percent favorable. Among Indians, who make up about 8 percent of the electorate, 59 percent were critical against 33 percent who were favorable.

The poll found that Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak's popularity is skidding as well, from 62 percent in December to 52 percent today. In the meantime, the premier's negatives are skewing up equally rapidly, from 32 percent in December to 44 percent today, by far the highest point in his five-year tenure. His approval rating with ethnic Malays, both his and the United Malays National Organization's base, has fallen from 76 percent last August to 65 percent today. For the 31 percent of voters who are Chinese, Najib's approval rating has fallen from 36 percent in August to 21 percent in December before rebounding slightly to 23 percent in the current poll.

The electorate gave a failing grade to the government's handling of the crisis involving the loss of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 with 129 passengers and crew on March 8, with 50 percent overall saying the government had done a poor job against 43 percent approving. The country has been the subject of widespread international disapproval of its performance over the disappearance of the jet.

Those unhappy with the government overall reached a high of 48 percent against 42 percent who said they were happy. Fully 7 percent said they were angry.

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