

Malaysians still think the government knows best, poll finds
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Many Malaysians put their trust in the authorities and are ready to give up some freedom for the sake of stability, making them more vulnerable to manipulation by those in power, a survey shows.

Pollster Merdeka Center found that more than 70% of Malaysians believe that debate on sensitive issues should be censored, and regard the different pressure groups as disruptive to communal harmony.

The October 2014 poll of 1,024 Malaysians from the peninsula and East Malaysia found that trust in authority was strong on both sides of the political divide, whether in the Barisan Nasional or the former Pakatan Rakyat parties.

However, the majority still believe in the rule of law, and want authorities not to ignore the law when dealing with issues.

"Although there is a segment of society that is ready for progressive attitudes, the majority remain wedded to more traditionalist, somewhat tribal, perspectives," the survey report's concluded.

"As it stands, Malaysians retain strong 'followership' attitude – accepting that those in higher stations decide what is best for them," the report, which is yet to be published, said.

Merdeka Center executive director, Ibrahim Suffian, said the reason for such strong trust in authority was because historically, those in power have been successful at providing for people's basic needs.

Compared with other neighbouring countries, the Malaysian authorities have been able to provide education, healthcare, roads, a stable economy and jobs for almost everyone, he said.

"From a sociological time scale, (the survey) reflects how Malaysians put their trust in authorities to deliver the goods because in the past, they have been good at doing so," Ibrahim told The Malaysian Insider.

Stability over freedom

The survey, "Moderate Malaysia: A closer look" was carried out from October 11 to November 2 last year through face-to-face interviews among Malaysians aged 18 and above, covering all races from both rural and urban areas.

It is divided into three parts: trust, political values and abdication to authority.

Although many trust the authorities, the survey found that 70% of them felt that most people are not trustworthy. Also, 64% agreed with the notion that most people would take advantage of them if given the chance.

When it came to political attitudes, respondents felt they had no say over how the government behaves and whether they could make a difference.

Only 36% felt they had the ability to participate in politics versus 61% who feel they can't.

About 72% feel that politics and government are so complicated that they can't really understand what really goes on in the country.

When it comes to influencing government, 61% feel that "people like them" have no power compared with 36% who feel that people do have influence.

On freedom of expression and association, more than 70% thought that the government should determine what is allowed and forbidden. The breakdown of these sentiments include:

- 73% believe the government should decide whether certain ideas can be discussed in society
- 79% feel that government should censor sensitive issues
- 71% think communal harmony will be disrupted if people organise in groups, and
- 72% feel society will be chaotic if people have too many different ways of thinking.

Despite their faith in authorities, 57% of respondents as opposed to 41% said was not okay for the government to disregard the law in order to deal with issues.

Ibrahim (pic, left) said although the authorities get high degrees of trust among Malaysians, there is a sense that just providing citizens with basic needs is no longer enough.

Over the last 10 years, he said, a growing segment of society, particularly urbanites and the middle class, are clamouring for the authorities to supply "second-tier needs".

These include greater freedom of expression and association, but also more enhanced basic needs such as quality tertiary education, affordable healthcare, good governance and a business environment that can give high-paying jobs.

The demand for these second-tier needs are part and parcel of a middle-income society which has met its basic needs, but requires that extra push to join the ranks of the developed nations.

"These second tier needs are the enablers, such as a more refined government,

quality education, that can push the country out of the middle income trap,” said Ibrahim. – August 24, 2015.

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