

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Title	Malaysia: Middle-Class Affectations of a Democratizing Multicultural Society
Source	http://phuakl.tripod.com/pssm/conference/day32.doc
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Publication/Conference	4th International Malaysian Studies Conference; 3-5 August 2004, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi
Edition	NA
Document Type	Article
CPI Primary Subject	Election and Politics
CPI Secondary Subject	Democratization; ;
Geographic Terms	Malaysia;
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Malaysia: Middle-Class Affectations of a Democratizing Multicultural Society ¹

By Johan Saravanamuttu

Abstract

The paper uses survey data comprising a sample of 800 Malaysian respondents from 11 states and one federal territory in Peninsular Malaysia. The survey was part of a larger study of the 10 countries of Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam and Uzbekistan under the “Asia Barometer” project headed by Takashi Inoguchi of Tokyo University.

The underlying theme of the paper is that Malaysian society, albeit with its embedded ‘multiculturalism’, has reached a new stage. It is now clearly a beneficiary of capitalist development with the concomitant rise of a new and large middle class exhibiting various middle-class affectations cutting across ethnicity. This has led to the growth of a political culture of “developmentalism” understood as the social corollary of the developmental state. Developmentalism leads to the many affectations for middle-class consumerist lifestyle – even amongst the working class – but at the same time it creates a political culture that is wont to eschew political risk and political agency.

Paradoxically though, Malaysian middle-class political culture has a reflexive element which tends towards the protection of bourgeois democratic rights and ‘liberal’ politics, especially when democratic rights come under severe threat from the state. It also evinces a high level of trust for certain democratic state and non-state institutions. However, whether this situation has brought about a consolidation of democracy in Malaysia is still debatable.

Historical Background

Malaysia’s population stood at about 23 million people in 2003. Officially, people are categorized as *bumiputera* or indigenous people and non-*bumiputera* or non-indigenous people. Malays, the aboriginal groups in peninsular Malaysia and the “natives” of Sabah and Sarawak states (on the island of Borneo) account for some 60 percent of the population, and together constitute the *bumiputera*. Chinese (about 28 percent) and Indians (about 8 percent), who began emigrating in large numbers to Malaysia during British colonial rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, constitute the non-*bumiputera*. Apart from linguistic and cultural differences, religion further distinguishes the ethnic groups from one another. The Malays are invariably Muslims, the Chinese predominantly Buddhists and Taoists, and the Indians Hindus with smaller numbers of Muslims and Sikhs. A small minority of Malaysians (drawn from all the ethnic groups

¹ A version of this paper by the same has appeared as as IOC Discussions Papers No 32, Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, March 2004, 20pp.

(including the Kadazan and Dayak *bumiputera* of Sabah and Sarawak respectively, but excluding the indigenous Malays) are Christians.

Malaysia (then 'Malaya') became an independent multicultural country 46 years ago. Multiculturalism as such was never acknowledged and really practiced either by the independent government of the Federation of Malaya in 1957 or by the Federation of Malaysia since 1963. Instead formal and non-formal political practices were embedded in what has been called 'consociational' political formulas for a deeply-divided plural society (Furnivall 1948). Many of these practices were handed down from the colonial era under the British. Because the various ethnic communities had already participated in the economy and in social life under the aegis of a British system of direct and indirect rule, their elites, who negotiated the terms of independence, structured into the constitution and formal practices (such as elections) what in retrospect were quintessentially communal arrangements which reflected the balance of power between the ethnic groups at the point of independence.

Most writers agree that the factors that brought about the terms of independence of the Malayan federation pivoted on the 'historic bargain' struck among the three major ethnic communities, Malays, Chinese and Indians. Prior to independence, the British proposal for the more classic equal citizenship based on a Malayan Union (1946) met with stiff resistance from the Malays and was replaced by the Federation of Malaya Agreement (1948) which provided the basis for the 1957 Constitution. This constitution was unique in that it recognized from the outset the special position and status of the Malay community and entrenched various privileges related to symbols of polity, language, religion, land and "special rights".

In short, from the beginning, multiculturalism understood today as stressing equal status and worth of citizens was not implemented. The non-Malay communities, predominantly Chinese and Indians who formed about a third and a tenth of the population respectively, had explicitly agreed to these terms of statehood, even if grudgingly, through the participation of their respective political organizations in the general election of 1955 under the Alliance Party. This party comprised the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). The Alliance under Tunku Abdul Rahman defeated most opposition, including Party Negara, the Malay-rights party of the first UMNO leader Datuk Onn Jaafar, who had early formed the multiethnic political party, Independence of Malaya Party (IMP). The Alliance swept 51 of the 52 seats contested, conceding one to the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). The election result showed that for all intents and purposes a multicultural political pact had virtually cohered by the time of independence via the political elites of the three major ethnic communities of Malaya. This result would henceforth frame future inter-ethnic relations in the new state.

The Razak Period

Much has occurred since early independence but in particular, as a result a major outburst of ethnic violence on May 13, 1969 after a general election, a new multicultural pact was established by the second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak. The Razak team put into practice an authoritarian political framework which delimited ethnic mobilisation and politics which remains in place till today. From the perspective of multiculturalism it was clearly a step backwards as various contentious issues were deemed “sensitive” and proscribed from political debate. Through the Constitutional (Amendment) Act of 1970, the following matters were sealed from public debate:

- Provisions of Citizenship
- National Language
- Special position of the Malays and the legitimate interests of other communities²
- Sovereignty of the rulers

To allow the government to act firmly on these matters, Article 10 of the constitution guaranteeing basic freedoms of the individual was amended to give parliament the power to pass laws prohibiting discussions on all the matters above. The Sedition Act was also refurbished to make discussion of these matters punishable by law.

Three other major themes of the Razak government’s broad multicultural practices comprised a top-down imposition of an authoritarian, consociational type of politics. The alliance formula was expanded and put on an even larger platform of multiethnic and multi-religious cooperation. Virtually all the significant political forces of the both sides of the ethnic divide, *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera* were incorporated into the Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition, with UMNO acting as *primus inter pares* (first among equals).

Most significantly, under Razak the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971-90) was formulated and launched. The NEP’s premises were that Malay poverty and resentment of inter-ethnic income and wealth inequalities, and the ethnic division of labour which favoured the non-*bumiputeras* and discriminated against the rural *bumiputeras*, lay at the heart of the May 1969 communal riots. Hence the NEP’s “Outline Prospective Plan, 1971-90” proposed that poverty be eradicated regardless of ethnic group (the poverty rate was especially high among rural *bumiputeras*) while *bumiputera* share of corporate equity be increased from 2.5 percent in 1970 to 30 percent in 1990. A massive affirmative action programme favouring *bumiputeras* was launched. However, to ensure that non-*bumiputera* Chinese and Indians were not adversely affected, the NEP was set within the context of achieving rapid economic growth during the duration of the Plan. Foreign domination of the economy, which in 1970 accounted for 60.7 percent ownership of assets in the corporate sector, would also be reduced drastically.

² Article 153 which pertains to this was amended to make the provision applicable to the indigenous peoples of Sarawak and Sabah (Milne and Mauzy, 1978: 98).

The Mahathir Period

It was the period of the prime minister Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003), which saw an official end to the NEP. Mahathir himself introduced the policy of Vision 2020 to turn Malaysia into a developed country by 2020. In place of the NEP, the New Development Policy (NDP) has been in place since 1991. On the eve of his retirement after 22 years in office, the outgoing prime minister in October 2003 conveyed a positive view of Malaysia's future. Unveiling the Mid-Term Review of the 8th Malaysia Plan, due to end in 2005, Mahathir said GDP grew an average three percent a year, per capita income rose an average 2.4 percent a year to 14,324 ringgit in 2003 while purchasing power grew 3.9 percent a year to 9,380 dollars. Prospects over the next two years were "promising" with GDP projected to grow at an average rate of six percent per annum to put Malaysia back on track to becoming an industrialized nation by 2020 (*AFP*, 30 October 2003).

On a less positive note, Mahathir said more efforts were needed to meet the target of putting at least 30 percent of the country's wealth into hands of Malays, and other *bumiputera* by 2010 due to the challenges of globalization and greater market liberalisation. A 60 percent quota would be implemented in the award of procurement and contract works in government projects to competent *bumiputera* and a new investment institution would also be established, offering unit trust products to mobilize *bumiputera* resources and to expand their investment opportunities. Their equity share stood at only 18.7 percent in 2003 and their ownership of share capital grew at an average 7.8 percent over the past two years to 73.2 billion ringgit (19.26 billion US dollars) in 2002, compared to Chinese ownership which grew at a faster pace of 11.2 percent to 159.80 billion. "We are not taking a step backward but if we don't have quotas, the bumiputeras may not get anything at all," he said (*ibid.*).

Mahathir's political legacy may be thought to be highly controversial. Having sacked his deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 on the heels of the economic meltdown of 1997/98 he led the ruling Barisan Nasional through one of its worst electoral performances in November 1999. It has been argued, however, that the train of events called *Reformasi* (renewal or reform), which resulted from the Anwar sacking and subsequent imprisonment, has brought about salutary democratic developments in Malaysian politics (Saravanamuttu, 2003). Loh has argued that a "new politics" had emerged in the Mahathir period, which had the dual aspects of "developmentalism" (the propensity for material well-being and its corollary of political quiescence) and paradoxically also "participatory democracy" especially in the non-formal aspects of politics (Loh, 1997, 2002, 2003).

The rest of this paper will examine the results of the Asia Barometer survey on Malaysia conducted in July 2003 paying particular attention to the lives of ordinary Malaysians, their living conditions, lifestyles, anxieties, dreams and frustrations with respect to society, the state, politics and democracy. The underlying theme of the paper is that Malaysian society, still quintessentially "multicultural", has reached a stage where it is now a clear beneficiary of capitalist development and growth and economic

development which has created a large middle class and various middle-class orientations amongst the working population (Abdul Rahman, 1998, Saravanamuttu 1992, 1996, 2001a). These orientations may be both supportive and critical of the existing social order but it is primarily based on a political culture of developmentalism which is the social corollary of the developmental state (Loh and Saravanamuttu, 2003). Developmentalism leads to the many affectations for the middle-class lifestyle of consumerism but at the same time it is a political culture that is wont to eschew political risk and political agency. Paradoxically, a reflexive element of such a political culture will be the tendency to protect bourgeois rights and even liberal politics when these ‘democratic’ rights come under severe threats (Saravanamuttu, 1992, 2001b).

The Malaysian Profile

First, it should be noted that the AsiaBarometer Survey comprised a sample of 800 Malaysian respondents was conducted in the 11 states and one federal territory of Peninsular Malaysia. Sabah and Sarawak were not surveyed.³ The 800 Malaysians (49% male and 51% female) ranging from the ages of 20-59 years showed the following broad features:

National Identity	Number	Percent
Malaysian	735	91.9
Indian	12	1.5
Chinese	47	5.9
Don't identify myself with my nationality	6	0.8
Total	800	100.0

- The overwhelming majority (92%) considered themselves as “Malaysians” above other identities (see below)
- However, when asked to identify their “subnational” identities, some 44.5% identified themselves as Malays, 21.8% as Chinese and 8% as Indians and 5.4% considered themselves as coming from the “East Coast” region (See below).
- Muslims constituted 58.1%, Buddhist 24% and Hindus 10.4%, Taoist 3.9%, and Christians 2.3%.
- Five family members was the norm (22.6%).
- Two-generational households constituted a majority (63%).
- Some 44 % had attained high school education (only 5.4% had tertiary education).

³ The survey was conducted in June 5 – 18 July, 2003 by Nelson Taylor Sofres Malaysia using a multi-stage stratified random sampling technique.

Subnational Identities	Number	Percent
Malay	356	44.5
Chinese	174	21.8
Indian	64	8.0
Other (ethnicity)	6	.8
From north region	20	2.5
From South region	26	3.3
From central region	12	1.5
East coast	43	5.4
Sabah & Sawarak	3	0.4
Other group	1	0.1
Don't identify with any region/group	95	11.9
Total	800	100.0

Religious Identity	Number	Percentage
Catholic	4	.5
Christian religion other than Catholic	18	2.3
Muslim (Sunni)	465	58.1
Hindu	83	10.4
Buddhist (Mahayana)	194	24.3
Taoism	31	3.9
None	5	.6
Total	800	100.0

- Only 8% could speak English fluently.
- Some 71% were married
- The modal household income per month (21%) was 10,001-15,000 ringgit (2,630-3,950 dollars)
- Homemakers (26%) and skilled and semi-skilled workers (21%) constituted the largest categories of the sample.

The Malaysian profile gathered from the survey indicates that Malaysian society is clearly marked by culturally divisions although clearly a strong national identity (“Malaysian”) is the primary identification. Ethnicity, often coinciding with religion, remains as a dominant identity marker, but interestingly, some Malaysians, but just a small minority, does now identify themselves with regions such as east coast, north, south and central over and above ethnicity. On the basis of the survey, and this would correspond with objective empirical data, Malaysian society has by and large become more “middle-class” and somewhat affluent. More survey data below will also show a strong consumerist orientation which will be one of the major themes of this paper.

Household Income	Number	Percent
Below RM5,000	34	4.3
RM5,001-10,000	122	15.3
RM10,001-15,000	157	19.6
RM15,001-20,000	105	13.1
RM20,001-30,000	105	13.1
RM30,001-50,000	105	13.1
RM50,001-80,000	60	7.5
RM80,001-100,000	27	3.4
RM100,001-150,000	13	1.6
RM150,001-300,000	6	.8
Total	734	91.8
DK/NA	66	8.3
Total	800	100

Life's Expectations and Satisfaction

Malaysian society by and large is already one blessed with all the basic necessities of life. The survey shows that electricity and piped gas is available to everyone and water to 97.3% of the respondents.

Despite being the beneficiaries of development anchored on globalization since the 1970s, and given that the Malaysian economy is highly dependent on external trade, Malaysians surprisingly do not communicate a great deal with people from the outside world. Only 4.1% have daily contact with organizations or people from abroad and 8.4% have traveled at least three times abroad in one year. Their external influence comes more from foreign television programs with 71.6% having watched such programs.

Malaysians are not very concerned about pollution, with under 50% thinking this is a problem. As much as 70% are satisfied with the condition of the environment. On the whole, Malaysians seem to be highly satisfied with life in general, viz:

- All things considered, 76.2% are very or pretty happy (See chart below).
- Satisfaction with friendship is at 92% with marriage at 95.6%, and with family life 92.7%.
- Satisfaction with housing stands at 73%, with standard of living, 77%, with household income 70.6%, with health, 87.3%, with education 74%, with job, 74.3%, with public safety, 71.8%

- Satisfaction with the welfare system is a relatively lower to the all the above at 65.9%
- Satisfaction with the democratic system of the country stands at a high 73.5.



Q4 All Things Considered, if You Are Happy or Not These Days

Contentment shows not much variation across cultural groups. When compared across self-identified ethnic groupings, Indians tend to show a slightly lower degree of satisfaction (68.8%) but ethnic differences on the whole do not seem at all significant. However, despite such high satisfaction indexes, Malaysians think of their standard of living as “average” (80%) and there are clearly certain concerns about daily life. When asked to select five among 20 items important to them, the following interesting results pertain:

- Topping the list was being healthy (76.3%), with having a comfortable home ranking a close second (74.8 %), and having enough to eat third (63.4%).
- The next set of preferences were things like spending time with the family (43.6%), having a job (40.1%) and living without fear of crime (35.1%), being successful at work (21.6%).
- Being devout had some 13.5 % in agreement while contributing to the local community stood at a low 5.9%.
- Among the lowest in the scale of importance were being famous (1.5%), experiencing art and culture (2.1%) and winning (2.5%).

Consumerist Affectations

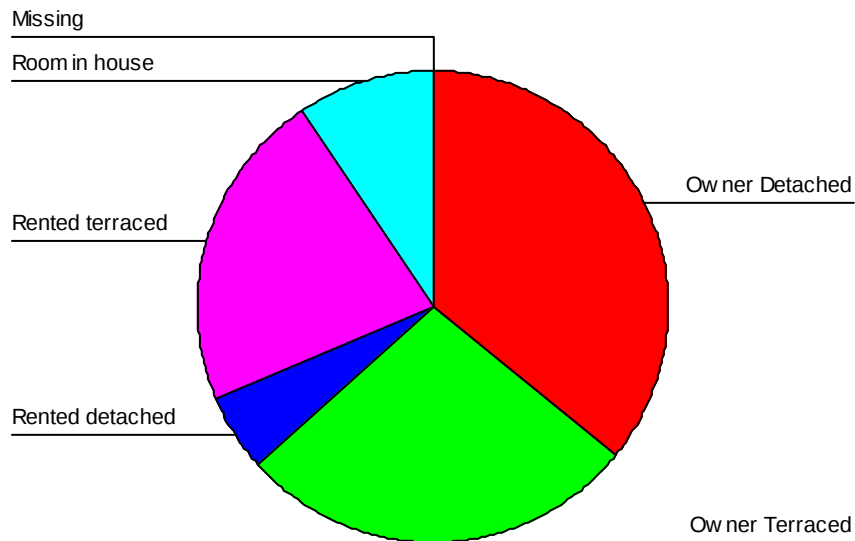
From the survey Malaysians show a demonstrable penchant for consumerism. On the basis of this data, I would argue the vast majority of Malaysians now affect middle-class lifestyles. This may be true even if a majority of them are not formally in the middle class. From the sample, we have noted that some 21 % consider themselves to be skilled

and semi-skilled workers while 26% constitute homemakers. In calculations that I have made in the past of the Malaysian middle class, I have put this figure at 30-40% of the working population (Saravanamuttu, 1992, 2001a)

Based on the survey data, we find the following material features of Malaysian lifestyle:

- Quite a large percentage of Malaysians own detached houses (35.8%) and terraced houses, units in apartments or condominiums (27.7%), leaving 22% with rented premises and 9.4% with rooms in a relative's home (See below).
- Some 92.4 % of Malaysians have the evening meal at home.
- Malaysians are not great consumers of alcoholic drinks with only 12.3% claiming to have such drinks over a month.
- Most Malaysian families are now owners of cars (65%) and motorcycles or scooters (71%).
- Cooking hobs (92.3%) and kitchen sinks (94.5%) are virtually universal for Malaysian homes although bathtubs are at a low 5.5% but showers are at 44.4%, while flush toilets stand at a high 74% and water heating is at 24.5%.
- Possession of electrical fans and refrigerators (important for the tropical climate) stands at 98.5% and 77.4% respectively while air conditioner usage (14.4%) still remains in the homes of a minority.
- Washing machines, 85.6%, are highly prevalent while vacuum cleaners, 32.5%, and microwave ovens, 16.4%, are becoming required items.
- Needless to say, the color TV has become a ubiquitous home item at 93%, with VCD or DVD players at a significant 77.1 % and cell phones at 58.3%, home telephones at 62% and 27.8% of Malaysians have had the services of cable television.
- Only 28.9% of households have computers, with internet connection at a low 10%, while 12% have used international credit cards.

Current Residence



The overall picture is one of greatly accelerating consumerist society. Not much variation appears when consumerist tendencies are compared across cultural groups. For example, with respect to cooking hobs, 90.2% of Malays compared with 89.1% of Indians own them, while an additional 6-7% of Chinese have the device. When it comes to owner-occupied detached homes, it appears the Malays are ahead with 45.6%, followed by the Chinese 27.6% and Indians, 14.1%. The reason for the large figure for the Malays is that many continue live traditional “kampong”-style homes in semi-urban and rural areas.

When it comes to the consumption of international branded products as opposed to local products, a feature that appears is the somewhat low sophistication of Malaysian tastes, at least as it would seem, based on the survey results. Most people would have heard of Asian manufactures, for example, Samsung (90.6%), Toyota (97%) and needless to say, who hasn’t consumed Coca-Cola (98%). However Kimberly Clark (21%) Toray (11.5%) and Budweiser (11.2%) don’t do as well among Malaysians.

When alcohol consumption is compared across cultures, it becomes clear that Malays show the lowest consumption at a miniscule 1.4% while Chinese (27%) and Indians (23.4%), still a minority within their community, do consume alcohol. Oddly, although wine consumption is not something Malaysians admit to (only 4.1% and 2.9% respectively have said they have done so over a month), anyone visiting Malaysian groceries or supermarkets will find them stocked with wines from France, Australia, US, South Africa and other wine-producing countries. The local brands of beer, Anchor and

Tiger, will also be in great supply. It is a well-known fact that among the penchants of Chinese Malaysian Chinese is the habit of consuming of French Cognac (Brandy) at festive occasions like weddings and birthdays.

Social Ideals and Aspirations

When it comes to ideals and concerns, the survey reveals a high degree of pragmatism and conservatism among Malaysians. When asked what is their most important social circle or group, we get the response as shown below. Family comes up tops with 80% of the choices, with religion coming next at 14%, place of work being the choice of 2.4%, club and hobbies gets a tiny 1.4% while labor unions and political parties hardly figure. The survey results come out strong to show that Malaysians do not have high social aspirations or political leanings. When the question is posed in the plural as to the groups important to you, neighborhood tops the list with 69.8%, followed by religion, 64.6%, political party at 15.5% and labor union at 9.3%. Two leanings are clear; Malaysians both self-regarding and only have small social circles but at the same time there is a high level of religiosity in their lives.

The Most Important Social Circle or Group

	Family	Relatives	Place of work	Club, hobby, social circle	School, university attended	Area where you grew up	People with same language or dialect	Neighborhood	Labor Union	Political party	Religion	DK/NA	Total
No.	640	11	19	1	2	6	2	3	2	2	111	1	800
%	80	1.4	2.4	0.1	0.3	0.8	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.3	13.9	0.1	100

An interesting commentary on the social aspirations of Malaysians relate to gender equality. While it is true that Malaysian society has achieved considerable equality of gender in most fields of endeavor, there is clearly much room for improvement. Less than half of the respondents feel that more should be spent on improving women's social status. A sad commentary is only the female opinion varies only a few percentage points from the male count (See table below).

Government spending in Improvement of the Social Status of Women

	Q23 Government spending should be more or less in Improvement of the Social Status of Women					Total
	Spend Much More	Spend More	Spend The Same As Now	Spend Less	Spend Much Less	
Male	36 9.9%	115 31.7%	170 46.8%	38 10.5%	4 1.1%	363 100.0%
Female	66 17.3%	127 33.2%	172 45.0%	16 4.2%	1 .3%	382 100.0%

Malaysians do generally think of themselves as democrats and feel that issues of human rights, freedom of expression and the like are important but are somewhat conservative when it comes to action or being critical of the government for not paying due attention to the practice of democracy. Some interesting responses on issues of this nature include:

- 95.7 % who show a strong preference for a democratic political system.
- 38.8% who say they are dissatisfied with the right to gather and demonstrate
- 28.4% who are dissatisfied with their right to be informed
- 44.6% about the right to criticize the government

Interestingly, not much variation across ethnic groups pertain on these matters, It would appear that Malays are as equally concerned as Chinese and Indians over such issues.

In the next section we will examine the respondents political orientations, political savvy and broad perspectives on social issues, which will throw further light on the pragmatic approach to social and political life of Malaysians.

Politics and Social Awareness

Studies of Malaysian political culture have found that Malaysians lean towards conservatism rather than activism although the latter element has manifested itself from time to time. In a recent study conducted by myself and a colleague (Loh and Saravanamuttu, 2003), we have drawn the following generalization:

“Turning to the ASEsurvey, we must tentatively conclude that both elements of quiescence and activism seem to be demonstrated in the rich data. There is certainly evidence that a ‘developmentalist’ orientation has found its way into Malaysian political culture. There is clearly a strong sense of faith and confidence in the capacity of the state, which generally is seen as an interventionist one. When it comes to tenets of politics, we find participant but not necessary sophisticated political actors. Malaysians are generally clearly still on the

conservative side when it comes to political activism. Nevertheless, there is a minority that has this orientation (but their numbers remain small) and this same minority sometimes swelling to a majority is highly critical of governmental malpractices. Perhaps this is indicative that “new politics” has taken root in Malaysia. In general, there is a great preference for electoralism among Malaysians over other forms of less formal political participation. Malaysians are also highly nationalistic but at the same time do betray strong ethnic and religious affiliations. Perhaps we could tentatively conclude that Malaysian political culture, from this survey, while shown to be participant, is still deeply embedded in developmentalism and ethnicity.”

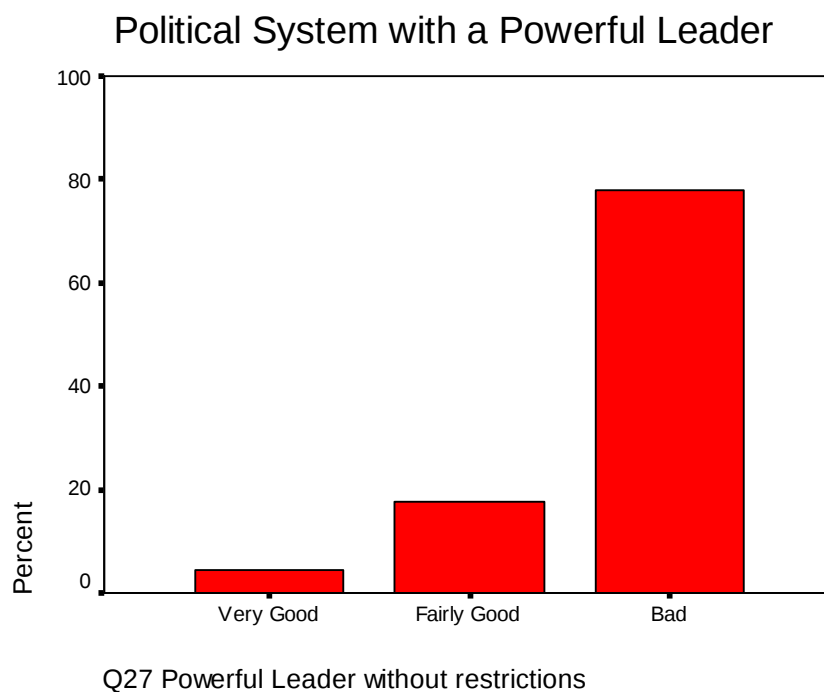
How much do you trust the Army

	Q21 How much do you trust the Army				Total
	Trust A Lot	Trust To A Degree	Don't Really Trust	Don't Trust At All	
Malay	222	110	10	2	344
	64.5%	32.0%	2.9%	.6%	
Chinese	37	88	31	8	164
	22.6%	53.7%	18.9%	4.9%	100.0%
Indian	33	22	4	0	59
	55.9%	37.3%	6.8%	.0%	100.0%
Other ethnic	2	3	0	0	5
	40.0%	60.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
From north region	10	6	0	3	19
	52.6%	31.6%	.0%	15.8%	100.0%
From South region	12	10	3	0	25
	48.0%	40.0%	12.0%	.0%	100.0%
From central region	1	6	3	0	10
	10.0%	60.0%	30.0%	.0%	100.0%
East coast	23	16	2	2	43
	53.5%	37.2%	4.7%	4.7%	100.0%
Sabah & Sawarak	1	2	0	0	3
	33.3%	66.7%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
No region/group	43	34	11	5	93
	46.2%	36.6%	11.8%	5.4%	100.0%
Total	384	297	64	20	765
	50.2%	38.8%	8.4%	2.6%	100.0%

The current survey tends to confirm the broad observation of the last study. Let us examine some the evidence. The level of trust in government and public institutions is as follows:

- The central government won 91% of overall trust with about 50% trusting it a lot.
- The army got 89% of trust with 50.2% trusting it a lot.
- The legal system chalked up 84.4%, with a smaller 31.8% showing a lot of trust.
- The police lose some percentage points at 75% and 31.6% respectively.
- Parliament gets 89.3% and 39.7% respectively.
- The public education system 91.1% and 49.5% respectively.
- The public health system gets a 94.6% and 53.6% vote respectively.

When compared across cultural communities, central government trust is highest among Malays with 57.6% giving it a lot of trust. The Chinese show a largish 13.5% of distrust. Similar results obtain with respect to the army with Chinese distrust rising to 23.8%. (See table above). Despite the high trust in public institutions, the bar chart below shows the overwhelming Malaysian distaste for an autocratic political system in which the leader governs without restrictions or parliament or elections.



Trust toward non-governmental institutions shows the following patterns:

- Large domestic companies have 80.4% more or less trusting them but only 20.7 with a lot of trust.

- Trade unions earn 83.8% of trust but only 22.3% put it at “a lot”.
- The media scores lowest at 68.5% figure with a significant 31.5% having no trust in it.
- Religious organizations get an endorsement at 90.3% overall trust and 44.5% with a lot of trust.

When compared across ethnic communities, it is interesting to note that Malay distrust of the media stands at a high 30.2% while the Chinese figure is much lower at 24.6% and Indians seem to be most trusting at 88.3% (See table below). As for religious institutions, it turns out that Malays are most trusting with only a minuscule 2.6% showing distrust. Contrariwise, the Chinese distrust figure stands at 21.9% with Indians taking the middle ground (10%).

How much do you trust the Media

	Q21 How much do you trust the Media				Total
	Trust A Lot	Trust To A Degree	Don't Really Trust	Don't Trust At All	
Malay	47	194	94	15	350
	13.4%	55.4%	26.9%	4.3%	100.0%
Chinese	16	113	40	2	171
	9.4%	66.1%	23.4%	1.2%	100.0%
Indian	27	26	7	0	60
	45.0%	43.3%	11.7%	.0%	100.0%
Other ethnic	0	4	1	0	5
	.0%	80.0%	20.0%	.0%	100.0%
From north region	3	10	4	2	19
	15.8%	52.6%	21.1%	10.5%	100.0%
From South region	3	16	4	3	26
	11.5%	61.5%	15.4%	11.5%	100.0%
From central region	2	8	2	0	12
	16.7%	66.7%	16.7%	.0%	100.0%
East coast	2	18	19	3	42
	4.8%	42.9%	45.2%	7.1%	100.0%
Sabah & Sawarak	1	1	1	0	3
	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	.0%	100.0%
Other group	0	0	1	0	1
	.0%	.0%	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
Ng region/group	8	37	45	3	93
	8.6%	39.8%	48.4%	3.2%	100.0%
Total	109	427	218	28	782
	13.9%	54.6%	27.9%	3.6%	100.0%

Finally on trust, Malaysians clearly have not been too impressed with global institutions:

- The UN gets 60.7% with only 13.1% showing it a lot of trust.
- The WTO has a figure of 72.4% and 13.6%.
- The World Bank wins 75.1% and 17.4% respectively.
- The IMF has a high 34.3% of distrust.

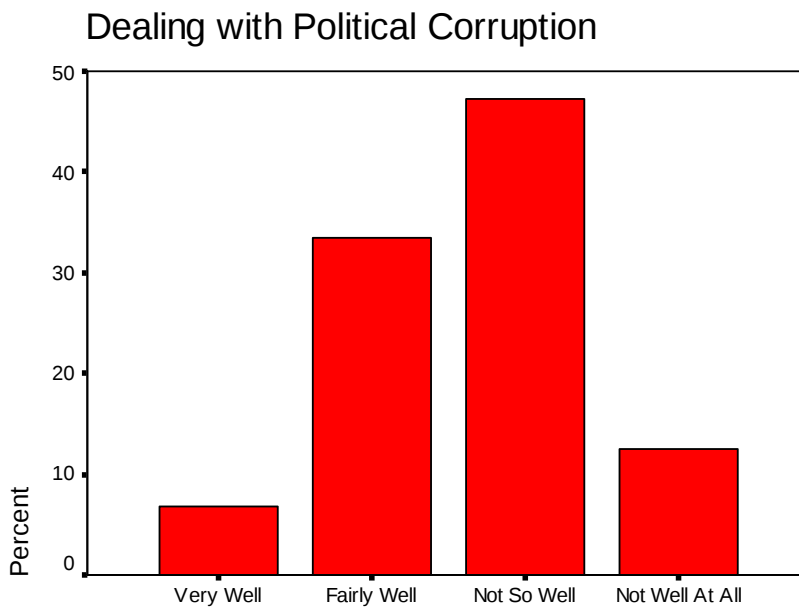
Comparisons across communities show highest distrust among the Malays for the UN and the IMF (See table below). Much of this can be explained by the financial meltdown of 1997/98 and also the failure of the UN to prevent the American-led war in Iraq. The Malaysian antipathy towards the US is extremely high with some surveys showing that that Americans are the most hated among foreigners. Malaysians generally see the US as dominating global institutions.

How much do you trust the International Monetary Fund

	Q21 How much do you trust the International Monetary Fund					Total
	Trust A Lot	Trust To A Degree	Don't Really Trust	Don't Trust At All		
Malay	40	153	86	37		316
	12.7%	48.4%	27.2%	11.7%		100.0%
Chinese	17	87	22	9		135
	12.6%	64.4%	16.3%	6.7%		100.0%
Indian	17	24	6	3		50
	34.0%	48.0%	12.0%	6.0%		100.0%
Other ethnic	0	5	0	0		5
	.0%	100.0%	.0%	.0%		100.0%
From north region	3	7	3	3		16
	18.8%	43.8%	18.8%	18.8%		100.0%
From South region	3	16	5	1		25
	12.0%	64.0%	20.0%	4.0%		100.0%
From central region	3	6	2	0		11
	27.3%	54.5%	18.2%	.0%		100.0%
East coast	0	9	15	12		36
	.0%	25.0%	41.7%	33.3%		100.0%
Other group	0	0	1	0		1
	.0%	.0%	100.0%	.0%		100.0%
No region/group	14	43	19	9		85
	16.5%	50.6%	22.4%	10.6%		100.0%
Total	97	350	159	74		680
	14.3%	51.5%	23.4%	10.9%		100.0%

Finally in this section, let's see what our respondents say about how well the government is dealing with various political and social problems:

- On the economy, fully 85.2% feel that it has fared fairly and very well.
- The government doesn't fair well at all on political corruption, with as much as 59.8% thinking that it has failed
- Human rights has a 71.3% positive response
- Unemployment shows a significant 48.1% negativity.
- Half the respondents think that crime is not handled well.
- A high 81.5% think that ethnic conflicts have been handled well.



Q22 How well the Government deals with Corruption

It is rather interesting to note that political corruption has stood as the number one problem in governance for Malaysians. This is true despite the strong trust showed to government institutions. When compared across ethnicity, Malaysian opinion about political corruption shows no significant variation with the Chinese showing only a marginally higher negative response.

Conclusion: Multicultural Civil Society in the Making?

The survey has brought out some clear features and directions of the social life and political orientations of Malaysians. As mentioned above, the observations and generalizations that can be made from the survey do not differ significantly from observations of other surveys which have been carried out in the recent past (Loh and

Saravanamuttu, 2003a, Saravanamuttu, 2003, 2001a, 2001b, 1996, 1992). However, the AsiaBarometer survey has further enriched our understanding by putting out an updated and highly comprehensive set of socio-economic and political indicators on the state of Malaysian society and politics.

It has been argued that Malaysian social life and politics is deeply embedded in its “plural” or multicultural society but at the same time this and other surveys show that middle class affectations cutting across ethnicity and religion have emerged in Malaysian society. We have argued that a strong “developmentalist” (or materialist) orientation is demonstrable in Malaysian lifestyles. The need to maintain and further valorize such lifestyles may have made Malaysians highly trusting of the public institutions (central government, army and police) which are presumed to have given Malaysians their economic development and political stability. Thus it is understandable that there is a continuing propensity to support the status quo and this is clearly evident in Malaysian attitudes.

Middle-class material self-interest or that of whatever class may also mean that citizens will act to protect those developments and problems that affect “the good life”. Thus we see in our survey the strong antipathy for political corruption and crime. Furthermore, it may also lead citizens to act in the interest of democratic rights such as freedom of speech, expression and other liberties. Such an orientation is clearly evident in the survey including a strong affective orientation towards democracy. Nonetheless, the willingness to act or do something tangible like demonstrating for one’s rights is true only for a minority not a majority of Malaysians.

Malaysians’ apparent low exposure to the direct forces of globalization have made them either mere unthinking consumers of such things as foreign television programs or contrariwise made them highly distrustful of international actors and institutions like the IMF and the UN.

Finally, pragmatism rules the day when it comes to the social ideals and aspirations of Malaysians. In many ways Malaysians remain a highly parochial and inward-looking and somewhat conservative lot and their main concerns revolve around their family and those close to them. Only a small minority of Malaysians appear to be champions of social causes.

Despite the above observations, a multicultural society in which ethnic conflicts and major cultural fissures and tensions have plagued Malaysian social life in the 1970s and 1980s seem to have dissipated based on the findings of the current survey. The different ethnic communities very often share opinions on many issues, including the high trust shown to national institutions. With the rising middle class, and its reflexive if weak democratic orientation, this means that a civil society, albeit culturally-bounded, will become the bedrock of political co-existence in a globalizing social and economic environment of which Malaysia is now embedded.

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