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News Release

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Public confidence in state of ethnic relations decline

BANGI – A new Merdeka Center survey has found that the number of Malaysians who felt that ethnic relations in the country was 'good' declined by 12% from 78% in February 2006 to 66% in May 2011.

The same survey also found that the number of Malaysians who believed that ethnic unity (perpaduan kaum) as "sincere and friendly" declined markedly from 54% in 2006 to 35% in 2011, a drop of 19%. On the contrary, the number of people who felt ethnic unity was "superficial" rose from 29% to 44%.

The opinion poll was carried out by the Merdeka Center between 24th May and 8th June 2011 to gauge voters' perceptions of the state of ethnic relations in the country. 1,013 registered Peninsular Malaysia voters comprising 602 Malay, 322 Chinese and 89 Indian respondents were interviewed by telephone in the poll. Respondents were selected on the basis of random stratified sampling along ethnicity, gender and state of residence. The survey was funded internally by the Merdeka Center for release to the public. This survey was a follow up of a similar poll conducted in June 2006 (available on our website www.merdeka.org).

Compounding the perception that ethnic relations have taken a turn for the worse, the number of Malaysians polled who felt that people in the country were "getting closer together" declined from 64% in 2006 to 36% in 2011. Looking, only 37% of those polled felt that ethnic relations would "improve in the next ten years" compared to 43% in 2006.

It is likely that the pessimistic results of the survey could be due to the intensified discourse in the media on race and religious politics as well as the impact of incidents that have taken place since 2008 which included arson attacks on places of worship, public debate over school text books and controversial statements by public personalities.

Beneath the surface, a society still riven by distrust.

The survey also found that the level of trust placed on of the three main communities had also declined. Overall trust among respondents towards members of the Indian community declined from37% to 31% while trust towards members of the Chinese community decreased from 47% to 42%. Trust towards the Malay community also declined marginally from 66% to 65%.

A significant factor noted in this particular query was the high level of distrust reported by respondents on their fellow Malaysians from a different ethnic background. For example, 60% of Malay respondents reported that they "somewhat distrusted" or "strongly distrusted" members of the Chinese community. Correspondingly, 42% of Chinese respondents along with 16% of the Malay respondents reported distrusting "people from the Malay community".

Unsurprisingly, the survey also found that adherence to derogatory racial stereotypes continued to remain persistent. Belief in racial stereotypes declined only marginally since the last survey in 2006. For example, belief in such racist stereotypes such as "The Malays are lazy", "The Chinese are greedy" and that "The Indians cannot be trusted" declined only by 2%, 3% and 2% respectively. It is important to note that each of these stereotypes was believed by a majority of the respondents. Ironically and perhaps as a marker of how deeply ingrained these stereotypes are, even members of the stereotyped community also accepted them. For example, 57% of Malays, 50% of Chinese and 36% of Indians, respectively report acceptance of the negative stereotypes of their communities.

Nearly a quarter of the respondents report that their views on stereotypes were shaped by their own personal observations along with a slightly higher number (26%) who said they were influenced by friends while one in five noted that it was derived largely by what they consumed from the media.

Overall 82% of Malaysians polled in this survey said they were "happy to live in a multi-ethnic society like Malaysia" however this represented a 10% decline compared to 2006.

Decline in society's self efficacy in addressing race and religious issues

The survey also found that public view of the Malaysian society's maturity in handling racial and religious issues has also suffered during in the intervening years. Only 38% of respondents agreed that "our society is matured enough to discuss racial and religious matters openly" compared to 46% in 2006. On the obverse, 55% of respondents polled agree that racial and religious issues are too sensitive to be discussed openly.

In our view, the survey findings reflect a significant shift in Malaysian public thinking – the optimism of the mid-2000s appears to have given way to increased insecurities and distrust which is in part due to the current competitive political environment.

Details of the survey findings can be downloaded from our website: www.merdeka.org

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