

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PUBLIC PERCEPTION TOWARDS ICERD & ETHNIC RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA

FEBRUARY 2022 -MARCH 2022

In 2018, the newly elected Pakatan Harapan led government was unsuccessful in implementing the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) following a series of considerable rejection and refusal from Malay groups. However, many including independent non-governmental organizations have taken the effort to educate the public about ICERD and work through misinformation and fear towards the international framework to eliminate discrimination.

This survey attempts to measure the perception of Malaysian adults towards the implementation of ICERD.

Methodology

For the purpose of the survey 1202 respondents were randomly selected proportionately from 11 states and three federal territories in Malaysia through a multi-stage sampling method. The phone interview was deployed as the primary tool to collect data. The data collection process started on the 24th of February and ended on the 20th of March 2022. The survey covered Malay (n=651), Chinese (n=336), Indian (n=85) and Bumiputera (n=130). religion in Malaysia.

Here are the primary takeaways of the survey;

1. **The level of awareness** on ICERD is generally moderate among Malaysians whilst Malays display a higher level of awareness compared to other ethnic groups. The lowest level of awareness on the convention is recorded by the Bumiputera community of Sabah and Sarawak as issues surrounding ICERD were raised, concentrated and mobilized in peninsular states.
2. However, the **level of comprehension** of the treaty is not consistent with the level of awareness recorded as only 3% claimed to completely understand while 27% somewhat understand ICERD.
3. Issues surrounding ICERD have slowly faded into memory with time as only 15% claimed to have heard of any news or discussion about ICERD in the past year. While **campaigns against discrimination** only managed to grasp the attention of 2 in 10 Malaysians.
4. A mixed level of support that is divided along ethnic lines is observed where Malays are more inclined to not support the convention while non-Bumi communities in Peninsular Malaysia show a high tendency to support it. The support of the Bumiputera community of Sabah-Sarawak is seen divided on this matter.
5. Malay community's reluctance to support the treaty is consistent with the significant level of belief in conspiracy narratives such as the possible diminishment of Malay rights and sultanate.

6. Perception towards ICERD is changing towards a more positive and neutral stance, however, at a slow pace.
7. National and religious identities are equally strong among Malaysians. However, non-Bumi communities are inclined to select national identity as their first choice of identity while Bumiputera communities are inclined to select religion as their first choice of identity.
8. 4 in 10 report having encountered discrimination, usually over their ethnicity, followed by socio-economic class. Gender and age is also mentioned as one of the reasons for discrimination.
9. Generally, Malaysians show openness in their preference for forming friendships with people from different ethnicities despite ethnic differences. However, aside from East Malaysian Bumiputera's, other communities show higher preferences for in-group friendship.
10. Malay community display an elevated tendency, though not dominant, to prefer in-group relationships compared to other ethnic groups. The tendency of in-group preference is highest in preference for spouse and community leader.
11. Chinese and Indian communities show openness in their preference for most relationships except for their preference of spouse. While Bumiputera of Sabah and Sabah exhibit a higher preference for out-group relationships as a whole compared to other ethnic groups.
12. Overall, in-group sentiments outweigh out-group ones. Indians and Bumiputera Sabah and Sarawak hold the highest favorability for out-group sentiments.

Conclusion

Perception towards ICERD is seen divided along the ethnic lines where the Bumiputera communities especially Malays take a more disproving ramification while non-Bumiputera communities display a more positive stance on the matter. The dichotomous perception towards ICERD is seen as a result of a lack of knowledge and persuasive narratives built around it causing most detractors of ICERD to follow the disproving movement without really comprehending their position. Despite the different stances on ICERD that make Malaysia appear like a racially polarized country, a majority show appreciation towards diversity and richness that all the cultures offer. This is evident in Malaysians' openness in preference for choice of friends, teachers, neighbours regardless of ethnic differences.

The survey shows that dedicated and persistent civil society effort can help improve moderation and awareness about ideal norms and subsequently pave the path for acceptance of ICERD as a reliable tool to tackle racial discrimination that affects Malaysians regardless of ethnoreligious differences.

Recommendation

Public perception towards ICERD is capable of changing and moving away from the persisting negative light through persistent public education efforts via means and methods that can reach different sects of communities in Malaysia.