

Liberalism still an alien concept to Malaysians?

Early last year, the word "liberalism" was demonised by a certain government body, which lumped the thought with "pluralism" and "extremism", among others, as having the potential to be radical. However, the fact is that liberalism is part of the nation's DNA as the first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, built this country on the very concept of liberty and justice.

Government bodies and political leaders aside, what do Malaysians think about the term "liberalism"?

To find out the answer, the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs conducted a survey last year, the results of which were released in March this year. A first of its kind in Malaysia, the survey will be conducted annually as we find it necessary to assess the progress of Malaysians' understanding of a concept that has been viewed so negatively in recent times.

Our survey uses a nationally representative sample of 1,207 voters. They were selected through random stratified sampling along the lines of ethnicity, gender, age and polling districts from across the country. Respondents were interviewed via telephone and in their language of preference. The survey had an estimated $\pm 2.82\%$ margin of error.

Generally, classical liberalism consists of principles such as the rule of law, limited government, free market and individual liberty and responsibility. Our survey specifically looked at liberalism in terms of political, economic and social liberty. Interestingly, we found that although Malaysians did not fully understand the concept of liberalism, a good majority still agreed with many of its principles.

From the survey, we found that a small majority of Malaysians had heard of the term "liberalism" (51% of respondents versus 48% who said that they had not). Additionally, those living in urban areas, with higher income and access to the internet, were better exposed to the concept.

Political liberalism

Besides the general term, we wanted to know whether Malaysians agreed to the concept of political freedom conceptualised as the freedoms of speech and of the press, free and fair elections as well as the rule of law. A majority of Malaysians agreed with essential principles such as free speech and media (77%), free and fair elections (84%) and the rule of law (91%).

However, when it comes to illiberal laws such as the Sedition Act, 60% of respondents overwhelmingly supported it as a necessary evil to maintain peace and stability in our society, although it starkly con-



Ideas

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Figure 1: Responses to the question 'Have you ever heard about liberalism?'

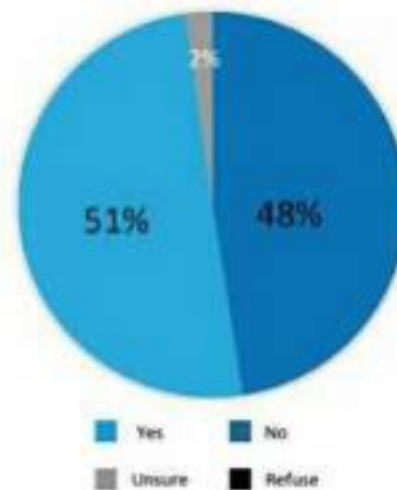


Figure 2: Responses to the statement 'The government should keep the Sedition Act'; by ethnicity



MB – Muslim bumiputera
Non-MB – Non-Muslim bumiputera

trasts with the notion of free speech and media. A possible explanation for these answers is that their understanding of "free speech" is inconsistent.

When this 60% figure is broken down by ethnicity, 76% of the Malay respondents thought the Sedition Act was important, whereas 61% of Chinese respondents disagreed with the law. Indian respondents were somewhat divided, with 51% for and 45% against. Although we are uncertain about the reason for the differences, a possible one might be because the Malay community enjoys the status quo, which controls free speech on bumiputera rights and other institutions such as royalty, including the special place of Islam as protected under the law. What we can conclude is that although this law clamps down on freedom of speech, it is still viewed with importance because of its perceived ability to sustain peace in a multicultural society.

Social liberalism

Again, there is a similar contradictory trend when it comes to social freedoms. We defined social liberalism as the ability to freely decide on how to live one's life so long as others are not physically harmed. This goes back to the classical liberal precept of individual liberty and responsibility. Although a majority agreed with this concept, including the notion that others should not impose on one's way of life, when asked whether the government should have control on citizens to protect our culture, values and traditions, 74% agreed that the government should intervene.

Again, it comes down to the conflict between individual rights and freedoms versus social conservatism. On the one hand, Malaysians respect individual freedom, but on the other, there is still an expectation for the government to police certain parts of our lives in order to maintain our cultures and values.

Figure 3: Responses to the statement 'The Government should control all citizens to protect Malaysia's cultures, values and traditions'

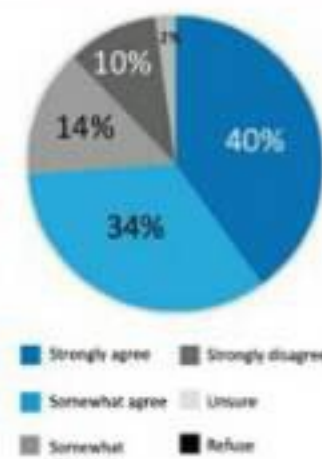
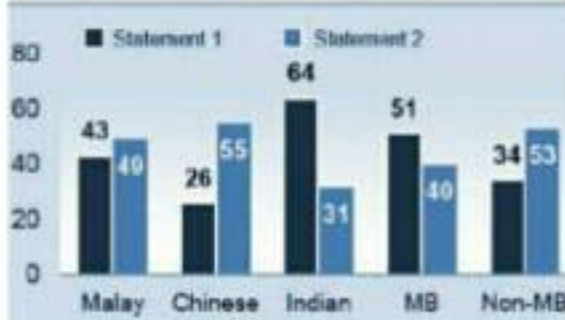


Figure 4: Percentage of respondents by ethnicity that either support

Statement 1: A big role of the Government in the economy with many government-linked companies (GLCs) is good. **Statement 2:** An open economy without GLCs would be good.



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Economic liberalism

When it comes to economic liberalism, there is a more diverse point of view. Forty per cent of respondents believed that the government should have a big role in the economy while 50% said the government should reduce its role, particularly the use of government-linked companies (GLCs).

Potentially, this is because Malaysians see the need for a free and open economy for growth in a globalised era, whereas others who have lived through the 1980s and 1990s when Malaysia's economy was doing well felt that GLCs were still needed in spite of then prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's protectionist policies.

Although Malaysians are divided on the role of GLCs, a majority are in favour of direct government support of local companies. When asked to choose between government control of domestic and international trade as well as subsidies to local producers and a completely free economy, only 37% of respondents felt that free trade was essential to making Malaysia competitive in the long run.

In conclusion, there still lingers contradictory beliefs regarding liberalism among Malaysians. Although many may shy away from the term "liberalism", the results show that a vast number of Malaysians support some aspects of economic, political and social freedom, albeit with certain restrictions.

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