POLITICAL PUBLIC OPINION STUDIES IN MALAYSIA

By

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Prepared for
1st Asia Conference on Public Opinion Research 2012
Asian Network for Public Opinion Research (ANPOR)
Bangkok, Thailand
November 27-29, 2012
Introduction

This paper is a preliminary statement on the development of public opinion studies in Malaysia. Surveys on the public opinion on issues during election and off election times are getting popular in Malaysia though not as popular as in the developed countries. The recent outcome of the U.S Presidential elections has made polling more credible in the eyes of the politicians and the ordinary voters.

Public opinion polling is popular in the United States, in Europe and in the developed countries of Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. In the Asean states, the Philippines and Thailand are now open to public opinion surveys. Opinion polling is now well-established in the Philippines, due mainly to the success in predicting outcomes of the 1992 and 1998 presidential elections (Mangahas, Guerrero and Sandoval 1999).

A feature of the Malaysian political scenario is the holding of regular elections to the Federal Parliament or to the State Assemblies. The Federal Constitution stipulates holding of elections every five years. A characteristic of the election is a short election campaign that is given prior to every election. In the most recent election of 2008, the campaign period was only nine days. A recent amendment to the Constitution has now made it possible for campaigns to be extended to 21 days. It is thus quite difficult to conduct public opinion polling given such a short period of campaign.

Background

Some form of public opinion activity, although rudimentary in nature, existed in Malaysia (then Malaya) during the British colonial time. Perhaps there was little sophistication in the approach, but public opinion was conducted among and by the British administrators to gauge the feeling and thinking of the Malaysian natives on several issues. A short review of literature did suggest that the British administrators were scholarly in their administrative approach as they aimed to understand the natives as subjects that they administered (Tham, 1981).

At the break of the Pacific War in 1942, those engaged in gauging public opinion or reaction from the general public through social science research, were mainly British administrators, basically oriented by the need to understand the culture, religion, language, eating habits, beliefs and taboos of the natives.

Research undertaken by research institutions or organizations of higher learning was rare until the first full-fledged university, the University of Malaya in Singapore, was set up in October 1949. It was with the setting up of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur in 1958 (that parted with its sister university of University of Singapore) that gave impetus to the development of social science in Malaysia on research areas that were geared toward meeting the needs of the society. With the setting up of other universities (Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, University Putra Malaysia, and etc) social science research began to develop itself.
Social science research was not coordinated and were not regarded as important to contribute toward the development of society in the early days of Malaysia. Little study was done on the development of the growth of towns and urban centres. As social science developed within the context of a colonial environment, the research questions and the ideological and theoretical pre-suppositions came as part of the colonial mind set.

Several studies were conducted in the former British colony, but the first known survey related to media consumption was undertaken in 1937 by Radio Singapore (then catering for Malaya) to understand the listening habits of its audience. Some three questions were placed in the daily newspaper, the Straits Times, asking the audience what they thought of Radio Station ZHL. The five questions were placed in the Straits Times on 14 April 1937 and were again repeated on 19 April 1937. The questions were:

1. What do you think of Singapore Radio Station ZHL
2. What programme do you liked the most.
3. What is your comment with regard to:
   
   (a) Local artistes
   (b) Foreign recordings

Based on the comments made by the audience, replies were made by the General Manager, J.S. Dumeresque on 21 and 28 April 1937.

The second known episode concerning public opinion was in 1954 when the United States Information Agency sponsored a study called “Communications and Public Opinion in Malaya.” This study was conducted by the Bureau of Social Science Research, American University, Washington. The second part of the report was more interesting as it reported public opinion on the economic condition of the country, opinion on the government and on the various races in the country.

The Overseas Audience Research Unit of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) had a private firm called the Malayan Research Services to conduct a research in 1959 on radio audiences in Malaya. It covered Singapore and Johor Bahru (Grenfell, 1979). The survey then undertook to conduct a newspaper readership. The survey team obtained the help of the interviewers and supervisors who were involved with the Department of Statistics for its 1957 Household Budget Survey but met with difficulties, work was abandoned.

The third known survey was on the Radio Listenership in the Federation of Malaya conducted in March and April 1961 by the Singapore based research team called the Far East Research Organization for the Government of Malaya.
A total of 3,133 respondents and 2,781 families were interviewed with the aim of knowing the composition of the audience, the pattern of listenership and the preference of radio station. The results of the survey showed that 90 percent of the listeners were exposed to the radio in a week, and 85 percent of them listened to the radio at home. The study found that high income people were likely to listen to the radio.

The 1961 Radio Listenership Survey marked the first time that the Government of Malaysia recognized the importance of audience feedback based on a quantitative survey.

From 1961 to 1964, Grenfell (1979) reported that four audience research projects were carried out. One project was carried out by a Bangkok-firm assisted by the Department of Information Services. Another survey was conducted by the Department of Information Services itself under the supervision of a foreign adviser at that time attached to the University of Malaya, and the other two were carried out by the Bangkok based Far East Research Organization.

The 1965 Radio Research Listenership Survey was carried out with Survey Research Malaysia with the co-operation of the Department of Statistics. The objective of the survey was similar to the 1961 study. But the sampling was better devised and the wordings of the questionnaire were better made than previously.

In 1965, six marketing companies sponsored a survey of the audiences of all major mass media available for advertising in Malaya and Singapore in what is now called the 1965 Media Study. There were more Media Index studies undertaken in years to come.

For the Family Survey 1966-1967, the Department of Statistics helped in a nation-wide survey for the National Family Planning Board but to minimize costs and error it devised a sample that was heavily concentrated in the metropolitan towns and highly clustered units. This marked the first time that an idea of the national sample came into being.

The setting up of the University of Malaya and the various development projects undertaken by the Government, constituted under the First and Second Malaya Plans, gave consciousness for research to understand the habits, culture and attitude of Malayans.

Another development that was drawing interest in the country was in politics. Malaysia is one of the few developing nations that conducts elections once in every five years or less as specified under the Constitution. The 2008 was the 12th election held since the first election was held in 1959. In every election, there was a need to know the demands of the voters. It was not that demanding when the first election was started but public opinion study was known to have started from the first the public opinion survey in 1986 and it was an initiative mainly drawn from the activities of academics.

There are several well known individuals and units in Malaysian universities conducting research on elections and politics. The Electoral Studies Unit at the International Islamic University Malaysia and the University of Malaya’s Centre for Democracy and Elections
(UMCEDEL) are the well known, although it must be acknowledged that individual academics in UKM, UM, USM paved the way in working on election studies (Ratnam, 1965; Ratnam and Milne, 1967).

**Public Opinion Studies in Universities**

The academics at the Department of Communication, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM - the National University of Malaysia), were challenged by Othman Said, from the Department of Information, Ministry of Information, in 1986 to conduct a public opinion poll on voters and voter intention like what were being done in the United States. We decided to pick up the challenge.

In the first and second study in 1986, Mohd Safar Hasim and I divided Peninsular Malaysia into various sectors to poll the opinion of Malaysians on their voting intention. The whole academic staff from the Department of Communication joined the project. It has continued over the years since then with whatever funds we had. We believe that issues, choice of leaders and party determined how voter intention and behaviour.

We used the survey method to ask respondents to answer the questionnaire administered on them. We used the quota sampling to obtain a picture of how the voters perceived issues.

We continued polling during the Ampang Jaya by-election in 1989. The idea to conduct a survey on public opinion came more or less as an afterthought from the Communication Methodology course. Mohd Safar Hasim and later Mazni Buyong were willing to give a helping hand when I started on conducting the survey seeking the opinion of the voters in Ampang Jaya. But we did more than that. We had another survey done before the election, meaning that we had two waves, one before and another after the nomination.

What surprised us was the ease that Malaysians were willing to answer our questions as we assume the question on choice of party was sensitive to be answered. Of course there were a few that rejected the approaches made by the enumerators but, by and by, all proceeded well. We had the results analysed. To add colour to the whole exercise we had some of the campaign speeches recorded on video (now kept with the Tun Lanang Library, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia).

The Ampang Jaya by-elections held in 1989 was the beginning of more public opinion surveys that were conducted over the years. I took an agenda setting approach by conducting public opinion studies together with content analyzing the media during the 1990, 1995, 1999, 2004, and 2008 elections.

The academics at UKM conducted several public opinion surveys on Malaysian voters over the 25 year period. But on hindsight we did more than just conduct mere polling as the academic drive in us called us to bring in academic input and some theoretical perspectives into our study. Our concern were on the voters, their perception on the
political personalities, political parties, the issues, the problems facing the country, and the media. In the early years the questions were more geared toward media use and voting behaviour but the survey developed better as and more in-depth questions were asked as years progressed.

But since the national newspaper, the Star sponsored and reported the first polling results on the eve of the 1999 elections, things have brightened up a bit for public opinion poll in Malaysia. The 1999 and 2004 opinion polls were sponsored by the national newspaper, the STAR and the results were given wide coverage.

On many occasions, Star has been more forthcoming in publishing the results of the polling that was conducted. In later years there has been more newspapers using the results of my polls. It was in 2011 more results were published in newspapers and online newspapers. My finding was for the first time used by the Defense Minister Dato’ Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi during the UMNO (the dominant and ruling party) Assembly, when in his capacity as a vice president, gave the winding up speech on 3 December 2011. His announcements on the popularity of the Prime Minister, was echoed on TV3 the same night and Star and Utusan Malaysia used it on 4 December, 2011.

In 2001 a multistage sampling of constituencies was used before selecting the respondents. In certain years, we would supplement by conducting qualitative studies such as focus groups and also by doing content analyses of the media.

In 2012, the Council of Professors awarded research grants to the Electoral Studies Unit, International Islamic University Malaysia; the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA)-Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Utara Malaysia to conduct studies on various aspects of elections. I managed to conduct three studies in April, May and July and conducted a state wide election in November, 2012, while UKM conducted panel and focused group studies from March to November, 2012. Universiti Utara Malaysia has completed its five state studies on voter behaviour. UMCEDEL has its own funds to conduct several studies on voter behaviour over the last few years.

The Council of Professors has called for two press conferences to announce the results of the findings and newspapers have given wide coverage. The announcement was given in the form of a one day seminar where newspaper editors were made chairpersons of the panel sessions. Hence the good publicity.

Besides the above named units in the universities there are other individuals and departments in the same universities and in other universities who have conducted research on elections. There are Department of Communication in UKM, UiTM, UniMas, UMS, UUM studying media coverage, the Department of Political Science, the Department of Geography UKM (affect of development on the outcome of voting behaviour) and even the Department of History of various universities.

Besides the activities of academics, there are marketing agencies that do studies on political behaviour. Opinion studies related to elections are noted to be conducted by the
universities than by outsiders, although of late more smaller agencies outside the universities have made their bid to conduct these studies for particular political parties. Well known is the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, that have been in existence for several decades, have conducted several research projects related to surveying of public opinion for KeAdilan, a political party and some BN component party. introspek Asia has done several localized political studies for UMNO. So is Matrix Research that has been entrusted by a BN component party to conduct nationwide studies on voter behaviour. These marketing agencies do the studies on the quiet side and the results are not announced to and by the press, except by the Merdeka Centre.

Factors Influencing Public Opinion Studies

Public opinion is normally associated with democracies but it can exist in a feudal state, theocracy or in a military junta. Public in public opinion implies that the opinions referred to are publicly expressed, that their reference are about public affairs, and they are held by the general public and not by members of some small groups. Public opinion need not just make announcements on the popularity of candidates or parties, but must highlight the concerns of voters through the expression of issues and problems. The study of public opinion is an expression of public concern, placing issues of society for discussion in a public domain.

Studies focus on the various aspects such as gauging the support for parties, candidates and satisfaction with government agencies and the identification of issues. Survey results are also linked with other factors such as the new and new media, and the political system of the country. Individual interests and concerns would add to the knowledge of elections and election studies.

Public opinion in a given country would be much developed if there are expertise available, if there are factors facilitating the conduct of polling, a positive press system and a general public that appreciates the role of the public opinion agency. Funding is of considerable importance as funding allows the gathering and the analysis of data and the report of the results. People who make use of the survey reports should also be able to distinguish the strengths and weaknesses of the data presented.

The study of public opinion requires funding and infrastructure. The university lecturers obtain their funding in conducting research either from the grants allocated to each individual institution or they make applications to the Ministry of Higher Education. The infrastructure that is mentioned here is the administrative support, the quality of the enumerators, the facilities such as the rooms, the computers, and the electricity to make the computers in operation. Funding to conduct research is also available from the newspapers and other government agencies.

In Malaysia, the year 2008 marking the 12th General Election, signals a country that is more amendable to accept a diversity of opinion which therefore allows for the coverage of polling results that may not be in correspondence with the dominant belief of society.
But the whole exercise is still left to the editors to decide whether they would like to have some of the findings published in their newspapers.

The growth of the new media is also important as it allows polling results to be published in them when the mainstream media finds it not palatable to print them. The audience members are therefore given more choice in the selection of media channels. The activeness of the general public also contributes by asking for the polling agencies to be objective in the gathering and in the analysis of data.

There are, however, many issues, that academics and experts involved in public opinion need to discuss. We have not discussed at length some of the sampling procedural problems, the agreement on computing some concepts (what constitutes a middle class?) and the manner in which the findings are reported by the press.
References


