

PRESS RELEASE

IKMAS Webinar Seminar Series

Public Perception on Election Management, the Election Commission & Democracy in Malaysia

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This seminar presents findings from a nationwide, face-to-face survey of 2,627 respondents between March and April 2021 concerning public perception on election management and the role of the Election Commission in the context of democracy in Malaysia. Below are some of the survey findings.

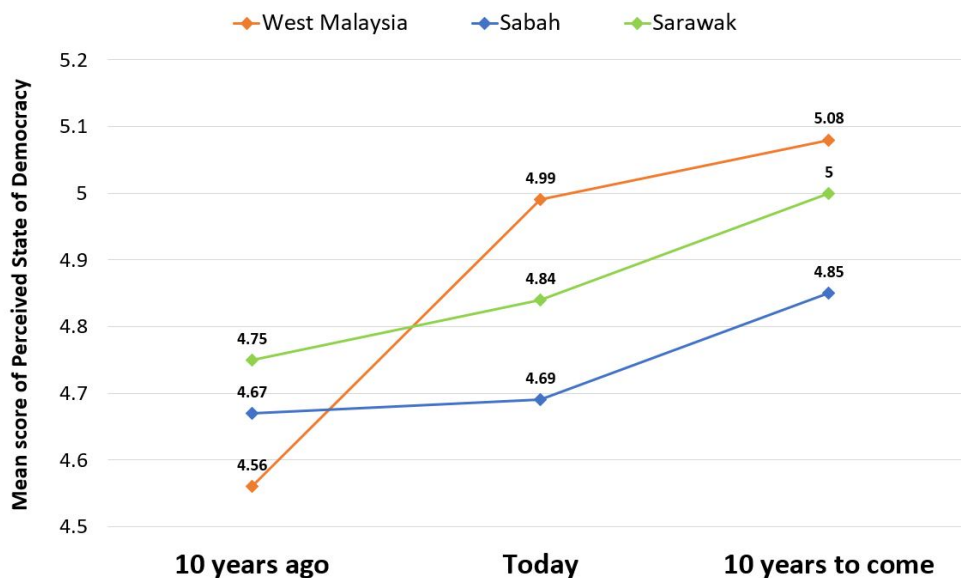
a) Perceived State of Democracy

- Is Malaysia a democratic country? On a scale of 1 to 7, please indicate your assessment of the current state of democracy in Malaysia.
- How was the level of democracy in Malaysia 10 years ago?
- Where do you expect the state of democracy in Malaysia to be in 10 years' time?
(1 signifies 'very undemocratic' and 7 signifies 'very democratic')

Table 1: Perceived State of Democracy

State of democracy in Malaysia	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.
Today	2627	4.90	5	5	1.356
10 years ago	2627	4.61	5	5	1.539
10 years to come	2627	5.02	5	5	1.501

Graph 1: Perceived State of Democracy (by Region)



The survey found that Malaysians by and large expressed a cautious, moderate affirmation of the state of democracy in Malaysia (mean score of 4.9 on a scale of 7¹). There is evidence that the change of federal government in 2018 has contributed to that perspective. Respondents anticipated a slight improvement in the state of democracy in the next 10 years, much lower than their perceived improvement over the past decade. They were comparatively less satisfied with the state of civil liberty², the worst being the freedom of assembly. Sabahans were the least satisfied with their state of civil liberty.

b) Trust in State Institutions

Mean scores of trust in different state institutions hover above 4 (scepticism) but below a conservative 'pass' of 5 on a scale of 7 (Table 2) – a weak expression of trust. Trust is markedly lower in the Executive and the Parliament as compared with other state institutions including the EC. An analysis by region and by urbanisation also confirms the same pattern.

Table 2: Trust in State Institutions

Trust in Institutions	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.
Judiciary	2627	4.62	5	5	1.299
Civil Service	2627	4.65	5	5	1.243
Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM)	2627	4.65	5	5	1.365
Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission	2627	4.63	5	5	1.346
Election Commission of Malaysia	2627	4.65	5	5	1.360
Executive (Cabinet)	2627	4.43	5	5	1.263
Parliament	2627	4.46	5	5	1.264

Regional comparison (see Graph 2) reveals interesting contrasts:

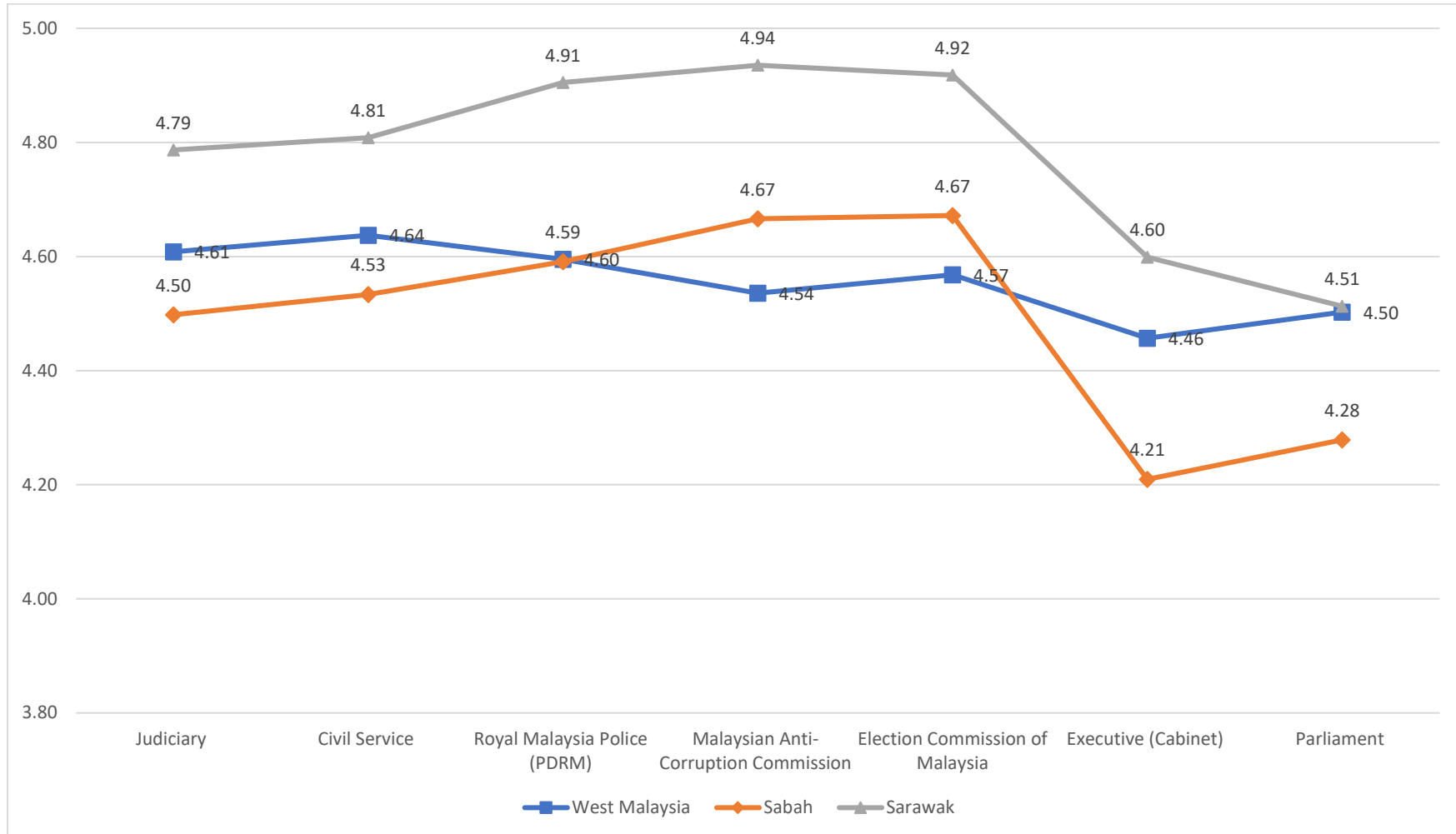
- Sarawakians indicated a higher level of trust in all the institutions.
- Sabahans expressed the least trust in the judiciary and the civil service as well as the Executive and the Parliament.
- West Malaysians notably had the lowest level of trust in the MACC and EC.

A comparison between residents in locations with different degree of urbanisation indicates that urban residents generally expressed a greater distrust of all the state institutions.

¹ On a scale 1-7 whereby 1 signifies 'very undemocratic' and 7 signifies 'very democratic', the mid-point 4 is interpreted in this study as 'neither undemocratic nor democratic', a non-committal, sceptical attitude. Throughout the study when the 1-7 Likert scale is used, 4 is understood as an attitude of scepticism.

² Respondents were asked to evaluate their level of satisfaction with media freedom, freedom of expression, association and assembly on a scale of 1-7.

Graph 2: Trust in the Integrity and Transparency of State Institutions (Regional Comparison)



c) Perception of the Election Commission: Between Performance and Political Impartiality

Graph 3: Perception of Election Commission

(1 = very dissatisfied/unfree, 7 = very satisfied/absolutely free)

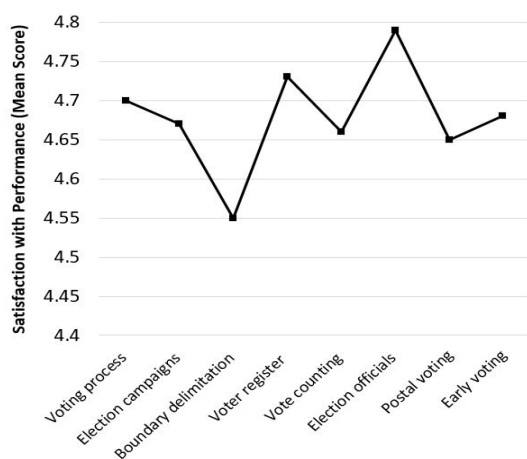
The Election Commission of Malaysia (EC) is an agency responsible for administering matters related to elections in Malaysia. On a scale of 1 to 7, please indicate your level of satisfaction with their performance in managing the following electoral matters in terms of **efficiency and professionalism**

(1 signifies 'very dissatisfied' and 7 signifies 'very satisfied'):

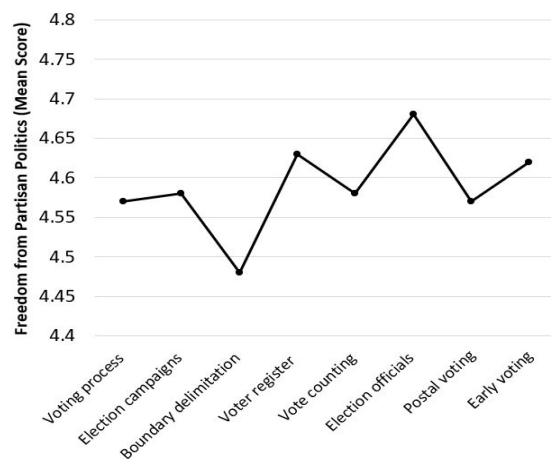
The Election Commission of Malaysia (EC) is an agency responsible for administering matters related to elections in Malaysia. On a scale of 1 to 7, please indicate your perception of the extent to which the EC is **free from the influence of party politics** with regard to the following electoral matters

(1 signifies 'very unfree' and 7 signifies 'absolutely free'):

Satisfaction with Performance: Professionalism & Efficiency



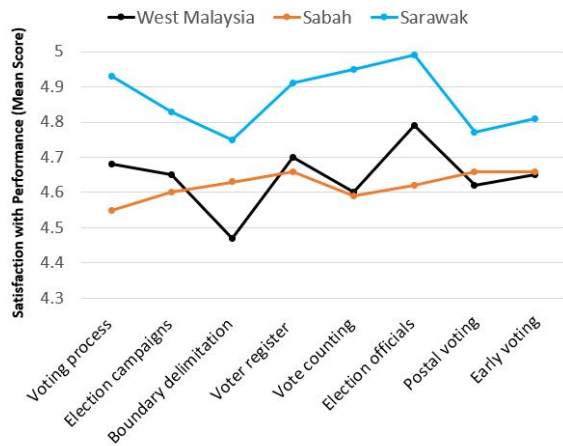
Freedom from Political Interference



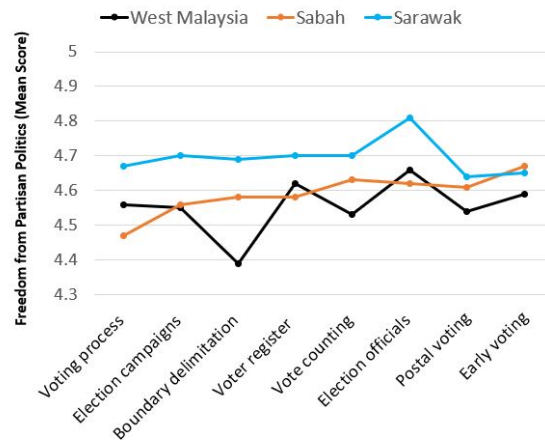
There is a correlation between public perception of the performance of the EC and their political independence in managing the various aspects of electoral process. The level of trust in the political impartiality of the EC is generally lower than level of satisfaction with their performance in election management. A notable finding is the much lower mean scores of the EC in the administration of the **constituency delineation** exercise, indicating a less favourable public perception in terms of the professionalism and political independence of the EC in drawing the electoral maps. The processes of vote counting and postal voting are also viewed more negatively, while the performance of election officials is perceived comparatively as the most satisfactory in terms of efficiency and professionalism in executing their duties.

Graph 4: Perception of Election Commission (by Region)
 (1 = very dissatisfied/unfree, 7 = very satisfied/absolutely free)

Professionalism & Efficiency



Freedom from Political Interference



There are regional differences in the perception. Unlike other regions, Sabahans did not particularly appreciate the performance and political impartiality of the election officials when compared with other electoral matters. They were also less happy with EC performance vis-à-vis voting process, the monitoring of the election campaigns and vote counting process. In line with the regional trend of trust in political institutions observed above, “trusting” Sarawakians also expressed the highest level of satisfaction and confidence in the EC.

The respondents were asked if Malaysia were to implement an online voting system, how confident they were that it would be conducted transparently. 54% of the respondents indicated that they were “not confident” or have “very low confidence”, while 27% said that they were “unsure”. Interestingly, when analysed by region, Sarawakians expressed the highest level of distrust, with 63% of them indicating either that they were “not confident” or “very low confidence”.

When asked whether they observed any difference in the independence of the EC before and after the last general election, about 49% responded that they were “unsure”, while only about 25% said that it is “very different” or “different”.

d) Perspectives on Past Election Management and Electoral Reform

Respondents’ appraisal of the 2018 general election and 2020 Sabah State Election is summarised in Graph 5. About 43% said that they were free and fair but with some problems. They were asked to explain their answers, and

only a small percentage of them did, with 250 answers that could be categorised, as in Table 3 below.

Graph 5: Perception on Past Elections

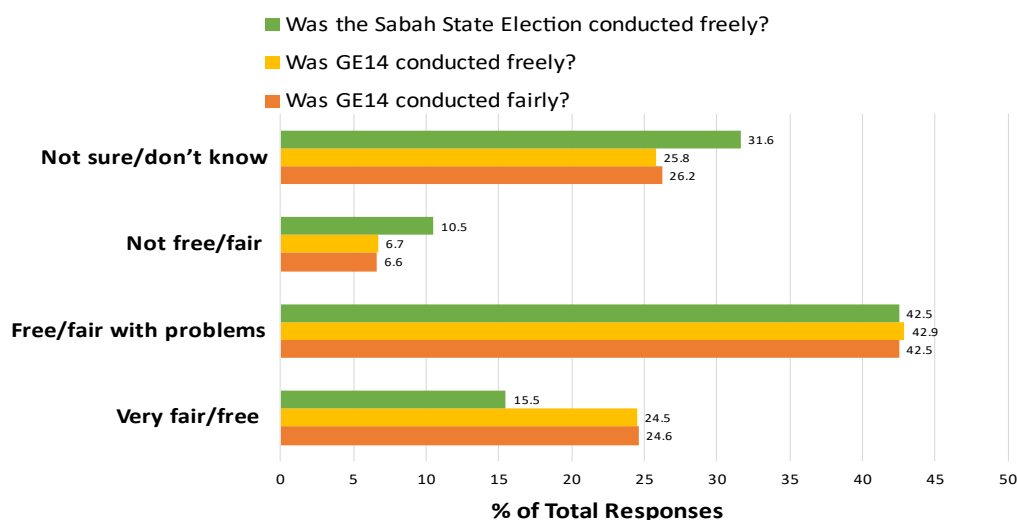


Table 3: Rationales for answers on whether the 14th General Election was free and fair

	Response	Count	Percentage (%)
1	Followed the right procedure/principle	77	30.8
2	'We managed to change the government'	37	14.8
3	Election management issues	84	33.6
4	Suspicion	21	8.4
5	Post-election grouses	31	12.4
	Total	250	100

Table 4: Open-ended Suggestions on Ways to Improve the Electoral Process by Respondents

Issues	Count	%
Fairness, transparency and integrity of the electoral process	197	40.5
Improve election management	103	21.2
Political interference / Independence of EC	47	9.7
Empowerment of EC	13	2.7
Anti-party hopping	28	5.8
Performance of MPs	24	4.9
Covid-related concerns	50	10.3
Others	24	4.9
Total responses	486	100.0

The last question in the questionnaire asked the respondents in an open-ended way to suggest ways to improve the electoral process. Only 486 responses can be categorised meaningfully (see Table 4) and most inputs are

short and quite general. While 74% of the inputs are related to election management and the EC, the rest are comments on party hopping, behaviour of MPs as well as concern about the possibility of holding general election during the pandemic time.

e) Other Reform Issues

Table 5: Government Funding Allocation for Members of Parliament

Response Options	Constituency Development Fund (%)	Funding for Legislative Work (%)
Govt rep. given more allocations	25.4	23.5
Equal allocation for all	72.1	73.3
Others	2.4	2.7

Table 6: Views on Anti-hopping Law, Registration of New Parties & UNDI18

Response	Enactment of Anti-hopping Law (%)	No Political Interference in New Party Registration (%)	18-years-old should be allowed to vote in GE15 (%)
Strongly disagree	3.5	2.1	6.2
Disagree	9.0	7.0	11.3
Agree	39.0	50.6	45.9
Strongly agree	19.4	15.4	15.3
Unsure	29.1	25.0	21.2

Table 7: Views on Party Hopping

Views on MPs who had switched party affiliation	%
• Should not switch party	34.5
• Party hopper resigns and seeks for re-election	40.7
• Party hopper carries on until the next general election	14.2
• It's his right of association to do so	8.1
• Others	2.6

Table 8: Opinion on Holding GE15 - Preferred Option to Resolve Political Instability

Ways to Resolve Current Political Instability	%
• To conduct the general election as soon as possible with strict SOPs	16.1
• To conduct the general election after Covid-19 situation is under control	49.3
• PN continues to rule with the support of PH based on the conditions agreed upon by both parties until the term in office of the current parliamentarians expires	26.5
• TS Muhyiddin should resign and make room for a new Prime Minister to be appointed.	8.1

Table 5-8 are findings on issues related to funding allocation to members of parliament, anti-hopping law, registration of new parties, UNDI18 and GE15:

- More than 70% of the respondents thought that government funds should be allocated equally to all members of parliament regardless of their party affiliation (Table 5);
- There is a strong public sentiment against acts of party hopping:
 - 58% agreed with the suggestion to enact an anti-hopping law so that an elected representative who switched party loses his/her seat but can re-contest in by-election (Table 6);
 - 41% wanted party hopper to resign and re-contest, while 35% affirmed that s/he should not have switched party (Table 7). Only 22% agreed with letting party hoppers to carry on till their term finishes or affirmed that it is their constitutional right to association.
- 66% agreed or strongly agreed that the registration of new political parties should be processed without political interference (Table 6);
- 61% either agreed or strongly agreed that technical issues related to voters younger than 21 years old should be resolved before the next general election is held so that their voting rights are respected (Table 6);
- 49% wanted the next general election to be held after Covid-19 situation is under control as a solution to the current political instability (Table 8).

f) Recommendations

Based on the survey findings, it is clear that public confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the election management process and the role of the Election Commission is weakly affirmative but fragile. While the image of the EC was gradually on the mend after the 2018 general election, the announcement of the delay in allowing citizens between 18 and 21 years old to vote appears to have damaged the efforts. Many of the issues and problems voiced by the respondents such as vote buying and ruling government's interference during elections, as well as the long-standing issue of constituency delineation can only be dealt with effectively by reforming the legal and constitutional framework under which the EC operates. The EC needs to be empowered to deal with many of the teething issues. And this should go hand in hand with reforming the procedure to appoint the EC chairperson and members to instil a greater public confidence.

There has been interesting political development lately, whereby the new law minister has announced that he is studying the political reform offers made by former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yasin, a number of which are related to the findings referred to above. Among them is to amend the constitution to legislate on an anti-hopping law. We would like to suggest that instead of an anti-hopping law alone, the government may want to consider a combination of both anti-hopping law and recall election to prevent the

occurrence of political instability due to changing party affiliation which has caused a great deal of public disaffection:

- a) A lawmaker would lose his or her seat if s/he defects or resigns from the party, or is expelled from the party for which he was elected, but is entitled to re-contest in the by-election;
- b) Lawmakers of a party which withdraws from the coalition in which they obtained their electoral mandate (using a common logo) could be subjected to recall elections.

Background Information of the Survey and Respondent Profile

The survey used stratified random sampling technique based on the 2010 Census data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, with a 2% margin of error and a confidence level of 95%. It targeted 2,400 respondents, with sampling units being divided into three regions: West Malaysia (1,600), Sabah (400) and Sarawak (400). In each region, the sampling was stratified based on population size and ethnic composition of each district. A pilot study was conducted in February 2021 before a full survey was conducted in stages throughout Malaysia in March and April 2021. In total, 2,627 respondents participated in the survey with 1,657 from West Malaysia, 506 from Sabah, and 464 from Sarawak, across urban (34%), semi-urban (33%), and rural (33%) areas. Balanced gender representation has been ensured for each region.

The cohort 21-24 years old constitutes the largest age group (19%). More than 60% of the respondents in West Malaysia and Sabah are between 18 and 34 years of age, and 18 to 39 years old in Sarawak. More than 75% of the respondents belong to the bottom 40% (B40) of the national income bracket. The respondents are mainly employees in the private sector, followed by students, business owners and the self-employed. In terms of educational level, 48.5% are SPM holders or below, 31.4% are STPM- or diploma holders, and 17.1% are university graduates. Respondents sourced their political news mainly through television and social media.

33% of respondents never followed news related to politics and government, another 33% only once or twice per week, and 31% read political news a few times a week or every day. Only about 25% had attended any political talks before, and comparatively, respondents from Sabah are more active in terms of attending political talks (35%) or involvement in political campaigns (22%) when compared with other regions.