Public discourse over the role of youth in nation building and participation in public has often been characterized by clichés that propound their role as the “future leaders of the nation” and as those retaining “idealism and purity of innocence”. This survey seeks to investigate how far these views are sustained by the youth themselves and how they relate to the political system, public life and their immediate community.

The reality of Malaysian public life is more complex and multifaceted than slogans may suggest. Recent news reports make mention of the large numbers of young Malaysians who have not registered as voters despite being eligible to do so and the difficulty experienced by some political organizations in attracting young people to join their cause are indicative of the general trend among young adults to pay more attention to the practical concerns of life rather than the more abstract and less rewarding nature of direct participation in politics.

The findings indicate a Malaysian youth whose views of society and the role they can be characterized by discernible differences across communal lines and marked by an overall low level of efficacy and engagement. These are among the key finding of Merdeka Center’s national youth civic engagement survey which sorts young adults into homogenous groups based on shared values, attitudes and civic orientation. The current study is based on a public opinion survey conducted on 1,505 interviews of young Malaysian adults aged between 16 to 32 conducted from May 24th to June 7th 2006. In addition, a focus group discussion to clarify and improve the focus of the questionnaire was conducted on 10th May 2006. After the conclusion of the survey, four more focus groups this time conducted from groups of young adults who were members of civil society organizations and those who were not, were carried on on June 17 and 18, 2006. Interpretations of findings were based on input from the survey as well as focus groups comprising of youth participating in civic organizations and those who do not participate from the Malay and Chinese community in the Klang Valley.

Main Findings

The findings portray a complex picture of the sense of self and community awareness among young adult Malaysians. The survey reveals some contradictions which may be warrant further exploration in future research. Based on the findings from the survey and focus groups with young adult, we draw the following preliminary conclusions:

Communal affiliation

Affiliation within communal boundaries appear to be a dominant defining characteristic for a majority of Malaysian youth particularly with respect to views on civic and political participation despite initial findings which suggested that
youths typically shared the same interests in pursuits and aspirations. The findings indicate that although an overall majority of the youth is concerned about the affairs and issues affecting their immediate community, Malay youths were more likely to participate in community activities or enter into political organizations.

The feeling of ethnic affiliation remains strong, for example, when asked on whether “one’s responsibility should first begin by helping members of one’s ethnic group before helping others...”, we found that 63% of Malay youths answering in the affirmative as compared to 44% for the Chinese and 22% of the Indians. Yet at the same time, a majority of those interviewed feel that the people of various ethnic backgrounds are “coming closer together” than moving apart.

Voluntarism

A significant number of young Malaysians have volunteered for a cause or charity with as many as one-third having done so over the past year alone. To a large extent, such involvement tended to be local in nature and in many ways specific and functional – community action to clean up after natural disasters, helping with weddings and deaths but did not extend into joining civil society organizations in a large way.

From the survey it appears that involvement in voluntary activities or civil society organizations had only a marginal effect on whether participants’ felt that they had the ability to change society or help those around them.

Self efficacy.

Thus it is interesting to note that respondents’ perceptions of their own effectiveness in solving the problems in society appeared to be severely limited. The survey finds that while 71% of young people say that they are concerned about what goes on in their immediate community, only 3% felt that they were very capable of doing something to resolve issues while a further one third (34%) felt that they “are somewhat capable” – meaning that they are limited to helping friends and close relatives.

Discussions with focus group participants generally indicate that participation in civil society and voluntary action are largely dependent on their peers. The chances for those in tertiary institutions to get involved is relatively higher as compared to those who go straight to the labor force after completion of their secondary education.

News consumption and political awareness.

The survey finds that the vast majority of the youth are regular news consumers whether in print or electronic form. A majority of respondents were more interested in following entertainment and sports rather than current issues and local politics. Unsurprisingly, 64% of the youth interviewed agreed that “politics
and government seem so complicated and they couldn’t really understand what is going on”.

It was found that a respondent’s ethnic background had some influence on the interest in news although varied across medium and message. Chinese respondents were interested in political news whether local or international particularly as presented in newspapers while Malays and Indians tended to be more visual consumers, preferring television rather than print formats.

**Appreciation of democracy**

The survey findings gives the impression that the youths’ appreciation of democracy is somewhat limited. The survey found 41% of young people were willing to forego elections if prosperity and peace were assured part of public life. It is rather disconcerting to note that one-third of those aged 30-32 felt similarly so. This finding may convey the attitude that while most people would, on the surface, report that elections are very important, they may in actuality feel that it has very little impact on the overall scheme of public life. This can be seen from the finding that only 8% feel that they can influence what government does.

Merdeka Center for Opinion Research
Bangi, Selangor
July 17, 2006
MAIN FINDINGS

BACKGROUND AND INTERESTS OF MALAYSIAN YOUTH

Demographics

The survey findings are based on the results of 1505 interviews with Malaysian adults aged 18 – 32. While key details of the sampling and survey process are described in the section under “Methodology and Technical Details” below, presented here are key demographics of the respondents laid so as to provide the reader with some context and background to the survey.

Age Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Groups</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-26</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27-29</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-32</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1505</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1505</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethnic Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanau</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iban</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bidayuh</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bajau</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murut</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadazan Dusun</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay East</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese East</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1505</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**State of Residence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perlis</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kedah</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penang</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perak</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selangor</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terengganu</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pahang</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negeri Sembilan</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melaka</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johor</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarawak</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabah</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1505</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Household Income**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than RM1,500 per month</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between RM1,501-RM3,000</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between RM3,001-RM5,000</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above RM5,000 per month</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1505</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hobbies and Interests

Malaysian youth tended for the most part, share almost the same interests and pursuits or the lack thereof during their free time. The survey finds that a largely plurality – one-third of the youth interviewed mentioning that they did not have any particular hobby aside from being at home. A quarter of all those interviewed mention reading as their main free time activity. This response is reflective across all ethnic, income and age groups. However, it is interesting to note that the bulk of the reading youth – 80% of them, consist of women. The second most popular activity is engaging in sports which affects nearly 23% of those interviewed. Unexpectedly, men form the majority of those engaging in sports activities, in particular team-oriented sports and games. Based on the survey findings, most mentioned team sports are futsal, soccer and takraw – subscribed by nearly 13% of those interviewed while paired games such as table tennis and badminton are engaged by about 5% of the youth.

Underlying the cultural differences in Malaysian society, the survey also finds that there are pursuits which appear peculiar to specific ethnic groups. No doubt that some of these findings may also be influenced by the economic status and locations of respondents. The survey finds that:

- Fishing is more popular amongst Malays at a ratio of 10:1 as compared to the Chinese or 2:1 as compared to Indians
- Activities such as swimming and golfing are six times more likely to be mentioned by Chinese respondents as compared to their Malay counterparts.
- Games such as badminton and table tennis are twice more likely to be played by the Chinese as compared to Malays and Indians
- Indians are nearly four times more likely to mention gardening or handiwork such as sewing and as making handicrafts as an interest as compared to Malays and Chinese

Travel

The survey finds that three-fourths (74.5%) of those interviewed have never been abroad. The findings suggest that age and economic abilities form a big part of the reason – younger respondents (those aged below 24 years old form the bulk of those who have never traveled abroad) but nearly half (46%) of those in the older age group (30-32 years old) have been in other countries.

The primary reason for traveling abroad is to take vacations – mentioned by 19% of all respondents, followed by 3% for reasons of pursuing studies.

The most visited country is Singapore – amounting to 7% of all respondents and nearly 30% of those who have traveled abroad. The survey finds that the vast number of those who have traveled abroad have mainly visited ASEAN
countries – accounting for more than half (54%) of those having been in another country.

Indicative perhaps of the different levels of economic attainment, the survey finds that 50% of Chinese respondents report having been abroad as compared to only 27% of Malays and 32% of Indians. As with other findings, the survey finds that some countries are more favored by particular ethnic groups over others. East Asian countries such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea are more likely to be visited by Chinese Malaysians as compared to Malays. Likewise with Australia, which is four times more likely to receive a Chinese Malaysian tourist as compared to Malaysians of other ethnicity.

Aside from ethnicity, the survey also notes some differences across gender: men are three times more likely to visit Thailand than women are, with men in their early 30s nearly four times more likely to visit the land of a thousand smiles than those in their early twenties.

Concerns and Aspirations

One important finding of this survey is that despite the apparent differences in interests and attitudes towards society and politics, the majority of Malaysian youths share the same concerns and aspirations. The survey finds that the aspirations of ordinary Malaysian youths to be firmly grounded in the practical concerns of everyday life.

Nearly a quarter (24%) of the respondents cite the desire to “raise a happy family” to be an important goal for themselves – an aspiration subscribed mainly by older respondent groups. For younger respondents, we find that “attaining academic success” to be their main quotient for success. Overall the survey did not find discernible differences across ethnic groups – suggesting that young Malaysians generally subscribe to the same aspirations and desire for success in their pursuits.

Likewise, the survey finds that more than two –thirds (71%) of respondents are concerned about problems in society and the community they live in. Again we find that Malaysians generally share the same anxieties – a large plurality (38%) indicate concern over the economy, commenting on issues such as high fuel, electricity and prices of consumer items. Surprisingly, concern over jobs appeared lowest, commented by only 2% of the respondents.

The survey finds that Malaysians also share these same concerns in nearly equal terms across ethnic and age groups.

The survey also discovered that a majority of young Malaysians also have a perspective on how global and events in far away places affect their daily lives. 54% said that world events affect them personally and for a significant plurality
(30%), this means the impact of wars and conflicts on the price of oil which in turn will mean dire consequences for the cost of consumer goods at home.

Consumption and Interest in Information

Newspapers

Overall, nearly all, i.e. 9 out of 10 of the respondents interviewed indicated that they read the newspaper at least once every week. However if one considers reading the newspapers five times or more each week to be the marker of being closely following events, then the number falls to less than half (47%).

The survey finds that there are demographic differences in terms of news consumption and medium. The Chinese and Indian are more likely to be avid newspaper readers than Malays – this is corroborated by the fact that Chinese language newspapers have a higher number of subscribers as compared to Malay newspapers even if the Malay population is at least twice larger. The survey found that 65% of the Chinese respondents report reading five or more days a week, comparable to the 60% of Indians interviewed; this is in contrast with 42% for the Malays and 37% for the East Malaysian Bumiputeras covered in the survey.

Television

In contrast to the high keenness showed by the Chinese community for newspaper reading, accessing news through television is accorded lower priority. The survey finds that only 25% of the Chinese respondents followed news on television more than five days a week. In fact the survey found that as many as 30% of Chinese respondents report not following the news on television at all. This is in stark contrast with Malay respondents where 95% followed news on television. A further 65% followed news five or more days a week. This trend is also similar amongst East Malaysian Bumiputeras at 56% and Indian respondents at 55%.

Radio

Radio no longer is the primary medium for news amongst the respondents where 43% mentioned that they do not follow news at all on radio. But we also noted some ethnic differences in consumption patterns – in contrast with other communities, we find that Indian respondents were the most avid consumers with 70% reporting that they follow news at least once every week while 30% report listening in for news every day. This is in contrast with other communities where news listeners number only approximately half of those interviewed.

Internet

The internet is by far the least widely available medium for news dissemination. The survey finds that only 25% of the respondents have accessed news via the Internet, from which only 7% can be considered as regular users (having accessed at least five days a week). Across demographic variables, it was found that there was no
major differences across age groups but household income levels greatly influences whether some has access to news from the internet. Unlike other findings, the survey found no discernible differences across major ethnic groups (with the exception of Bumiputeras from Sabah and Sarawak – which has the lowest level of access at only 18%). Instead it was found that respondents with household incomes above RM5,000 per month were nearly twice more likely to have accessed news of the world wide web as compared to those with household incomes at less than RM1,500 per month.

**Interest in News**

The survey finds that interest and consumption of news differs greatly with respect to medium and form of information across key demographic variables. Indicative perhaps of other findings in the survey, it was found that in general, interest in politics and current issues amongst young Malaysians were outstripped by their avidity for coverage of entertainment and sports events. However this is true in some but not all of the demographic variables – as with other findings, some clear patterns emerged across ethnic lines but in others where one would aspect such as education or household income levels.

The survey finds that less than a third of respondents, 29% reported following international news and politics closely, this is topped by 43% who report following up on local politics and current affairs. However, nearly two-thirds of respondents, at 64% and 63%, reported following closely on entertainment and sporting news, respectively.

Across demographics, the survey found that Chinese respondents were nearly twice more likely to express interest in foreign news as compared to the Malay and other Bumiputera counterparts at 43% as compared to 26% and 20% respectively. Likewise the results of the survey also shows that nearly two-thirds (61%) Chinese respondents report following local politics and current issues closely as compared to only 37% of Malay respondents, 40% among Indian respondents and 32% among other Bumiputera respondents.

Denoting their situation as high volume consumers of information, the survey found that Chinese respondents also rated highly in terms of following entertainment news closely at 71% as compared to 60% for Malays, 62% for Indians and 73% for other Bumiputeras.

In contrast to the items mentioned earlier, the survey found that interest among Chinese respondents towards sports news however were markedly lower than the national average at 49% as compared to 62%. From the survey, it appears that the most avid follower of sports news would likely come from amongst East Malaysian Bumiputeras at 74%, followed by Malays at 67% and Indians at 59% respectively. It should be noted that there were no noticeable differences in the way respondents answered to this item across variables such as education level, household income or age group.
Attitudes towards Community and Society

The survey finding that 71% of respondents indicating the feeling of concern for issues occurring in the community suggests that many young Malaysians generally do care about the issues that affect their surrounding society. Indeed, discussions with focus group participants indicate that most people are acutely aware of problems and concerns in their immediate vicinity but what is most telling however is that the majority of people do not feel capable of making a difference in solving those problems.

The survey reveals that only 3% of the respondents feel “very capable” of solving the problems affecting their community while a further 35% felt “somewhat capable”. Discussions with Chinese and Malay focus group participants representing those who do not join community or charitable groups indicates that many of them feel they cannot make a difference in their local community even if when they are aware of the issues that beset the community. In such cases, the participants cite reasons such as not knowing how to assist, lacking any friends or contacts who can lead them or can organize to solve problems. For the majority of those interviewed, it was found that many would only help immediate members of their family or friends resolve personal problems but report that they do not know how to go about addressing ‘bigger’ community-wide issues.

Volunteerism

Reflecting the general trend which suggests a lower level of community engagement, the survey found that 40% of those interviewed had volunteered for a cause in the past, from which 27% had done so in the past 12 months.

Follow up questions reveal that for the majority of those who had volunteered, many had do so in support of community activities such as gotong royong (community work) (16%) followed by helping the underprivileged such as the poor, orphans and the aged (6%) or joined local community service bodies such as neighborhood watches (Rukun Tetangga) or voluntary corps (RELA).

Survey findings indicate marginal difference in the response from rural and urban respondents for volunteering as a whole but some unique responses in the form of activities taking place. For example, gotong royong is more likely to take place in the rural area as compared to activities to aid the poor and orphans which are twice more likely to take place in urban areas. Across ethnic groups, the survey found that Malay, Indian and Other Bumiputeras are more likely to be involved in voluntary activities as compared to the Chinese. The survey also did not find much discernible difference across age or income levels of the respondents.

Voluntary Body Membership

In terms of membership in voluntary organizations, the survey found that nearly 61% of all respondents belong to either a political, social or religious oriented organization or have participated in some local community action. From this number, 36% see
themselves as actively involved in their respective organizations. In terms of membership in voluntary organizations, the survey found that:

**Political Parties**

Malays by far outstripped other ethnic groups in reporting involvement in political parties with 15% claiming membership as compared to 6% for the Chinese, 7% for the Indian and 7% for other Bumiputeras. Across age groups we noted that political organization membership were reported by 6% of those aged between 18-20 years old and this trend increased in older groups up to a high of 20% for the age groups of 27-29 years old. The survey also found a slight difference between men and women with respect to political party affiliation at 12% and 10%, respectively. It should be noted that while 11% of the respondents report being members of political organizations, only 2.5% felt that they were active as members.

**Religious Organizations**

The survey finds nearly one in five young Malaysians reporting to be a member of a religious organization. In the context of the survey this meant that besides being members of a religiously oriented NGO or charity, it could reflect one’s involvement with the local temple, mosque or church as a committee member or volunteer. Contrary to earlier expectations, there were no major differences across income levels – that people from lower income groups were as likely to report involvement as those from the higher levels. However, there were some marked differences across faiths, with those who profess being Muslim, Hindu and Protestant being more likely to be involved in some religious oriented organization as compared to those professing other beliefs.

**Social Organizations**

The survey finds 17% of those interviewed reporting membership with some social organization. Based on feedback from interviews, a significant number of these constitute affiliation with local community organizations, residential associations, local recreational clubs and social organizations such as Lions Clubs and workplace social/recreational organizations. As with other forms of memberships, the survey found the affiliation among Chinese respondents to be markedly lower than the national average at 9%.

**Implications on Socio-Political Efficacy**

The findings on concern for problems affecting the community and the level respondents are involved in finding ways to resolve them and their participation in voluntary organizations seem to imply that there is weak connection between these three elements: that being involved in local civil society does not necessary lead one to attain a higher level of efficacy in addressing common problems at the local problems. It could
well be that the aims of the various organizations are specific and may not necessary
touch on resolving problems or it could also mean that problems affecting the local community are such that they require the intervention of higher authorities such as the government.

Indeed that this may well be the case given that the most cited problem is cost of living issues, crime and public safety – areas which generally fall within the ambit of government authority. This sentiment is reflected in the survey: when asked if “government policies affected their daily lives”, the survey found 80% responding “a great deal” or “significant impact”. Across demographic variables, the survey found as significantly lower number of Chinese respondents answering in the affirmative, at 61% as compared to the national average – suggesting perhaps a disconnection with government decisions that affect their daily lives, either in the form of participation or consultation.

Interestingly, when respondents were asked “how much influence could you have on what the government does”, affirmative responses reported were generally equal across all major ethnic groups at 41% among Malays, 35% among the Chinese, 45% among other Bumiputras but only 23% among Indians. The survey also found that lower income and higher educated respondents had a higher likelihood of holding the perception that they could make a difference in what government does.

Findings from focus groups suggest that respondents meant that they could exert impact through the electoral process and to some extent, participation in political and social organizations.

The survey also found that the perception of higher efficacy tended to corroborate with how often people discussed government policies with their friends and colleagues. The survey finds that only 14% of respondents reporting that they often discuss government policies and current issues with friends and colleagues a few times a week. A further 43% remarked that they too discussed such matters at least once a week. The survey again finds that the reported level of discussion is lowest among Chinese respondents with only 6% reporting discussions as “often” and 30% reporting it as “sometimes – at least once a week”.

For the 42% of respondents who reported that they rarely or never discussed policies, the survey followed with a question as to why it was such. It was found that amongst a majority of them or 18% of all respondents felt that they themselves felt uninterested in the issues and policies. Those professing lack of interest however tended to be younger than average, were more likely to be female and ethnically Chinese.

**Levels of Civic Engagement**

With such low levels of efficacy, the next findings of the survey can be put into context. Results of the findings show that only 20% of those interviewed had effectively engaged the system of governance in what ever form.
The survey found that only 13% of respondents had ever met with or contacted government officials to express their views or talk about addressing some problem (many of which impacted them personally). As anticipated, it was found that such exposure tended to increase with the age of the respondent but some trends persisted—Chinese respondents were still the least engaged at 9% while Indian respondents were the most engaged at 22% saying having contacted government officials.

With respect to more passive forms of engagement, the results found that only 7% percent had signed petitions or written to newspapers (or even to send text messages via their mobile telephones to media outlets) to express their views. In this aspect we found that Chinese respondents reported accessing this means at a comparable rate with the national average.

Exposure to more active forms of engagements appeared more severely limited. The survey found only 4% report having participated in marches, protests or demonstrations. Of this group it was found that the majority were largely Malays. Patterns across other demographic variables were not discernible.

**Attitudes towards Politics and Democracy**

Based on the low levels of civic engagement and social efficacy, we find that a significant plurality, 28% were not able to describe their thoughts on what politics meant to them. Significantly, such sentiments were relevant across the age spectrum and were not confined only to the youngest among respondents. For the remainder, their perceptions of politics tended to cluster along two principal notions— that it pertains to the affairs of government, management of national aspirations and leadership while for others it conjures a negative image of corruption, manipulation and of politicians struggling to gain power.

**Influencers**

The survey asked respondents on who they considered to be the primary influence for their views about politics. The results indicate that whom respondents considered to be the top influencer differed across age groups. Older respondents were more apt to reflect that their views were shaped by the media and of their own ideas but younger respondents were more likely to say that their parents and politicians helped form their views. In many ways the findings reflect the progression in the formation of one’s political outlook and can be the result of exposure during one’s life cycle.

**Awareness**

By and large the presence of politics in Malaysian life is often celebrated during the process of elections which has the outward atmosphere of fanfare and anticipation. Indeed the survey finds that nearly all (93%) of the respondents feel that elections are important but the results also show that not all fully internalize its meaning and usefulness. For the majority, 64%, politics and the affairs of
government “seem so complicated that they could not really understand what is going on”.

When asked if they knew the Member of Parliament for their area, only 59% of those interviewed reported in the affirmative. To a large extent, the finding is also indicative of political maturity as the response rates appreciably improves in accordance with the age of the respondents. However, across demographics it was found that results varied across ethnic groups – that it was highest among Bumiputeras of Sabah and Sarawak at 72% and Malays at 62% but lower with the Chinese at 47% and Indians at 53%.

**Trust in the Political System**

One element of the survey tests respondents’ trust in the political system through a series of questions which pits their viewed on notions contested between the ruling parties and those in the opposition.

With respect to the electoral system, the survey finds that an overwhelming majority of the respondents in general felt that elections in Malaysia were free and fair. It should be noted however that such perceptions were highest amongst those who have never voted at 74% but gradually diminished with older respondents (aged 30-32) at 58%. There are also some communal differences, 70% of Malays felt it was generally free and fair but only 63% of Chinese felt the same sentiments.

With regards to having a balanced media, the survey asked respondents if they perceived that the media in the country were free from government influence. In this respect the survey found only 40% respondents answering in the affirmative. Unlike other queries, the responses to this question were shared in equal measures across all ethnic groups and most other demographic variables.

**OTHER FINDINGS**

**Democratic Values**

**Importance of and trust in elections**

The survey finds that nearly all of those (93%) of those interviewed reporting that elections play an important role in the national life of the country. At the same it was also found that nearly one-quarter (27%) report that they believe that elections in Malaysia are free and fair while 42% said that it was “somewhat free and fair” while the remainder reporting varying degrees of elections not being free and fair. From this response, it appears that there is nearly unanimous acceptance of the democratic process as a political system but there is varied opinion as to its veracity and effectiveness.
When asked of focus group participants, two dominant views emerged from them, the smaller but more politically aware members of civil society organizations were nearly unanimous in their view that aside from being regularly held, the election process appeared to be marred with allegations of fraud, manipulation and bias in the state and ruling party controlled media. Those who were not involved were more sanguine in their views noting instead that while they acknowledged that the conduct of elections were biased against opposition parties, they appreciated that it was conducted in a violence free environment which in turn, they say, helps promote peace and stability in the country.

**Willingness to Forego Elections**

The survey asked respondents if they were willing to forego elections in return for a guarantee of peace, stability and economic growth. The survey finds that 41% of the respondents answered this query in the affirmative. It should be noted that younger respondents tended to accept this proposition more than older respondents but only by a margin of 13%. Across ethnic groups, the survey found almost half (49.2%) of Chinese and 48% of Indian respondents saying that they would be agreeable to the proposition as opposed to 36% of Malays and 42% of other Bumiputra Malaysians. It should be noted there were no major differences in the tendency to forego detected across the educational background of respondents, most forms of occupation or income levels.

This finding may suggest that the notions of democracy as it applies in Malaysia could use further improvement and that it may also indicate that there is a significant proportion of the public who would be willing to forego some democratic rights in return for a better level of economic attainment.

**Trust in Government**

It may well be that having had only one dominant ruling coalition run the country for the last one-half century meant that most Malaysians have not encountered the need to make changes in their democratic choice during elections. However the survey reveals that the idea of having checks and balances remain healthy as young Malaysians do realize the role of citizens in watching over the actions of government. Paradoxically, some of the same people who indicated willingness to forego elections also felt that citizens need to maintain oversight over the actions of government. Indeed the survey finds that 59% of those interviewed agreed that the public should monitor the actions of government, and these views are also shared by a significant majority (65%) of the Chinese and the rest of the ethnic groups.

Interpreting this response, it may appear that there is acute realization that there is a need to have public oversight over the action of government, there is at the same time, a significant lack of appreciation of the effectiveness of elections as a way for checks and balances to be implemented on the conduct of government.
Criticism of Government

In this respect the survey found that an overwhelming majority of those interviewed felt that open criticism against the government does not constitute a lack of loyalty to the country and instead spelled love for the nation. The survey found that this sentiment appears to be pervasive across all major demographic variables. However the instances with which criticisms may appear are open to interpretation. Based on discussions with focus group participants we found that young Malaysian had notions over the forms of how criticisms could be made, for many, criticisms can be acceptable in the form of letters to the press, to officials as well as expressed during elections. However protests in the form of demonstrations are not widely supported, when asked why, many respondents belonging to the non-engaged group felt that it may adversely affect investor confidence in the country and lead to anarchy. On the contrary, interlocutors from civil society organizations were open to all forms of criticisms.

This view is reflected when respondents were asked on how open the media should be. The survey found that the respondents were almost evenly split on this matter. Slightly over half of respondents, at 53%, felt that the media should be open and report on all issues but a significant plurality of 45% felt that it should be controlled on account of maintaining the sensitivities of the various segments of the population. The split in views are most evident in the Malay segment of the respondent 49% were in favor of keeping controls on the media while 48% were in favor of it being made more open. The sentiment is markedly different in the Chinese community where 70% wanted media to be open while 27% favored controls. On the other hand, members of the Bumiputra community of Sabah and Sarawak were in the majority (60%) in favor of having controls. The survey also found that the sentiments favoring controls over the media were indirectly correlated with education – the lower the education level the more likely they were in favor of controls.

Multicultural Values

Self Identity

In this close-ended question, the survey asks respondents what they considered themselves to be first. The results indicate that only 40% of those interviewed considered themselves first to be Malaysians, a nearly equal proportion of 39% saw themselves first as members of a religious denomination (mostly Muslims), 17% saw themselves in terms of the ethnicity while the remainder constituted various combinations of the earlier three responses.

It should be noted that differences were marked across ethnic groups. 61% of Malays saw themselves first as Muslim, which constitutes 90% of those who see themselves first as members of a religious denomination. The Chinese respondents were nearly evenly split between those who saw themselves as Malaysians first at 44% and as Chinese at 47%. 75% of the Indians saw themselves as Malaysians firsts, followed by 63% of the Sabah and Sarawak
Bumiputras. Across age groups we note that the view of seeing oneself as members of a religious denomination is higher among younger respondents than with older age groups. At this point, it is uncertain whether it represents a growing trend with the younger respondents or whether it is a view that many begin with but later grow out of as they become older.

**Perception of Beneficiaries of Affirmative Action Programs**

One central feature of Malaysian public life is the prevalence of the discourse that focuses on providing affirmative action for Bumiputeras. In this area, the survey asks respondents on who they felt really benefited from the programs undertaken by government in its pursuit of this agenda. The findings from this open-ended question are interesting and provocative. The survey found that about one-third of respondents perceived that the affirmative action programs have largely benefited those who are politically connected, about one-quarter perceived it benefited all Malaysians while one-third said it benefited the Malays principally. Responses across ethnic groups reveal an interesting topography of opinions and views that may reflect into the political inclinations particularly among Malays.

Within the Malay community, a large plurality (43%) believed that affirmative action has benefited those with political connections, such perceptions far outstrip the other positive views such as that it benefited all Malays (21%) and all ordinary Malaysian citizens (27%). Within the Chinese community, a significant majority of 59% perceives that it only benefits Malays, 20% feeling that it benefits those with political influence but only 13% thinking it benefits all ordinary Malaysians. The views of the Bumiputras of Sabah and Sarawak are also interesting: 41% feel that affirmative action truly benefits those with political connections, 13% feeling that it only benefits Malays but only 37% feel it benefits all citizens. The survey finds that the view that such programs benefit the unintended, politically well-connected individuals tends to increase with the age of the respondents interviewed.

**Positions in Government**

When the survey asked whether important positions in government should be given on the basis of ability, it was found that an overwhelming number (85%) of Malaysians of all ethnic backgrounds answered in the affirmative. Although the survey detects a small degree of reservation among Malay and East Malaysian Bumiputra respondents (responses were spread across the two affirmative answer options – “Strongly Agree” and “Somewhat Agree”) there appears to a general acceptance for merit to play a prominent role over ethnicity when it comes to appointments of top officials.
Helping Others – Does Race Matter?

However when it comes to matters that are more in their control, the survey finds that a majority of Malaysians continue to see ethnicity as something important and are more likely to consider helping someone on the basis of sharing the same ethnic background.

The survey found that this tendency is highest among Malay respondents with 64% agreeing to the statement that “one’s responsibility should first begin by helping members of one’s ethnic group”. The sentiment was not as pronounced in other ethnic groups with 44% among the Chinese, 43% among other Bumiputras, and only 23% among Indians.

Morality

Queries on morality was incorporated into the survey in order to aid the formation of a multifaceted typology of respondents. The purpose of its inclusion into the survey was to enable researchers to understand the degree to which members of the young Malaysian adults were socially conservative or statist in their approach towards addressing concerns over morality.

The survey found that a majority of 62% of respondents felt that morality should be regulated by government. It was found that the ethnic background of respondents were likely to influence the results. 73% of Malays, 67% of Indians and 55% of Sabah and Sarawak Bumiputras were in favor of regulation by government. On the other hand, the same survey also found that 61% of Chinese favoring self and family regulation. It should be noted that the age of the respondent had no major influence on the results.

In a specific test of a morality issue often given coverage in the local mainstream press, the survey asked respondents if they felt that it was wrong for unmarried couples to hold hands. The results indicate that 90% of Malays, 66% of Sabah and Sarawak Bumiputras answered in the negative while 97% of Chinese and 57% of Indians answered in the affirmative. It is interesting to note that when the same question was put to the discussion of the focus groups, Malay participants there took a long time to discuss and eventually arrived at the view that it was wrong for unmarried couples to hold hands in the eyes of Islam but admitted that this is a usual behavior and really up to the individuals involved “to be responsible for themselves”.

Gender Role in Political Leadership

The survey asked only one question that touched on the subject of gender. Respondents were asked if they would accept a woman as a prime minister. The results were rather surprising: overall a majority (65%) found it as acceptable but upon closer scrutiny it was found that Malays were split over the question 47% said it was acceptable but 52% did not accept. Meanwhile a majority of those from other ethnicities were acceptable to the notion.
Islam and Democracy

The role of Islam in public life in Malaysia is a long discussed matter with many different facets in its argument. The survey attempted to touch public opinion on this important issue and find out what young Malaysians felt with respect to its compatibility with democracy and their aspirations with respect to the role this religion plays in the politics and public life of the country.

Attitudes towards Islamization

The survey asks respondents to choose one of out three statements denoting the extent of Islamic influence on public life. The results found 23% desired a reduction in the role of Islam (in the form of the statement which reads “government and religion should be kept separate”), 48% desired the status quo (based on the statement which reads “government implementation of Islam should be kept at current levels”), while 21% wanted Islamic influence to be further deepened (indicated by the statement: “The implementation of Islam should be further increased by introducing the Sharia’ law including hudud”).

Across ethnic groups, the survey found that a majority of the Malays at 61% favored the status quo while 34% favored increasing the implementation of Islam further. Only 3% of Malays subscribed to the view that religion and government affairs be kept separate. With the Chinese, 26% favored the status quo but a majority, 64% wanted religion and government be separated.

Islam and Democracy

The survey asked respondents if they agreed with the statement that “Islam and Democracy were compatible”. The survey found 72% of the respondents agreeing with the statement. However upon closer scrutiny, it was found that while Malays and East Malaysian Bumiputeras largely answered in the affirmative, the Chinese were split (53% for and 40% against) and Indians were overwhelmingly negative (65% against). These queries were put to focus group participants and the answers provided were telling.

To a large extent, non-Malay focus group interlocutors generally agreed with the Chinese and Indian results of the survey for this question. When explored, several volunteered the view that democracy in its truest form denotes equality and freedom of expression. The participants of the focus group expressed that in their view, there is much inequity when it comes to how the government treats and administers the rights across different ethnic groups. One respondent noted that it was difficult for non-Muslims to obtain the necessary permits to erect their places of worship while others related the perceived preferential treatment accorded to bumiputeras (in the form of real estate price discounts, access to better government guaranteed mutual funds and financial aid for higher education). As a group they felt that these imbalances were undertaken in the name of democracy and Islam that the government promotes. The group felt that such actions were in serious contradiction with the tenets of democracy. They
perceived that it is unlikely for such practices to be changed even if Islam were to play a wider role in public. Instead there is a concern that it could learn to further infringements of their personal rights and impact their way of life.

**Future of Malaysian Society**

Finally the survey asked respondents on their expectations on the trajectory of Malaysian society. A large plurality 43% desired a society where races and cultures were equally treated, 18% wanted a society where Islam played a more dominant role, 27% wanted a more democratic society but only 6% wanted a Malay dominant society.

Across ethnic groups it was found that Malays were nearly equally split across the three major opinions: 31% wanted an equitable society, 30% wanted an Islamically dominant society while 27% wanted a democratic society. However, across other ethnic groups the sentiment is clear: a significant majority of nearly 60% wanted an equitable society.
DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY AND TECHNICAL DETAILS

INTRODUCTION

This survey is carried out with a view towards canvassing the opinions of Malaysian youth on their political, social and economic values. The basic terms of reference for the assignment are as follows:

1. Conduct a quantitative survey of young Malaysian adults aged between 18 and 30 in order to measure their opinion and values on governance and society;

2. Undertake qualitative research based on focus groups of segments of the youth in order to better insight and explain some aspects of the qualitative survey

3. Prepare a report that covers the main findings and highlights of the survey.

Funding for this survey was made available by the Asia Foundation.

TECHNICAL DETAILS OF THE SURVEY

Location

The qualitative survey was carried out between 24th May and 4th June 2006 on 1505 respondents.

During the process, Merdeka Center contacted and interviewed randomly-selected adult citizens aged 18 to 32 years old across Peninsular Malaysia as well as Sabah and Sarawak. For the purpose of this survey, Merdeka Center sampled respondents on the basis of the proportions of voters for each state as indicated in the 2005 update to the Malaysian Census published by the Department of Statistics.

The qualitative research work was conducted on the weekend of June 17th and 18th 2006 amongst four groups of respondents screened for participation and non-participation in civic groups and activities.

Respondents were selected by an independent recruiter aided by screening questionnaires provided by Merdeka Center. Respondents comprised of residents of the Klang Valley area as well as students from universities in the area.

Interview Timetable

The interviews were generally carried out from 9:00 AM to approximately 9:30 PM in the evening. Care was taken to ensure that the survey covered respondents during the
period they were considered most likely to be at home. Thus the interviews which took place on evening of Thursdays and daytime on Fridays were mostly implemented on respondents who lived in states that had their weekends beginning on Friday while respondents in other states were generally contacted on Saturday and Sunday.

**Sampling Method**

**Sampling population and Sample Selection**

The sampling population refers to the pool of respondents satisfying the demographic requirements from which potential respondents are selected. Merdeka has access to an extensive database of households with fixed line telephones. This database comprises nearly three million households throughout Malaysia.

The sampling frame comprising all the states of Peninsular Malaysia was screened for telephone subscribers according to their ethnic backgrounds. The targeted sample size for each state was ensured to be proportional to the updated census figures provided by the Department of Statistics.

**Stage 1. Selection of Respondent Telephone Numbers**

Selection of telephone numbers was performed by using a computer sub-routine that generates a set of random numbers within a range corresponding to that of identifier numbers in the telephone subscriber database. The telephone numbers were then selected by matching the generated random numbers to the identifier numbers assigned to households in the telephone database. The resulting list of potential respondent telephone numbers was then checked to ensure proportionality with the number of residents of particular ethnic groups in each state.

**Stage 2. Selection of Sampled Households**

The above mentioned randomly generated respondent telephone list was sized at five times the desired sample size of the survey to ensure adequate numbers were available for interviewers to contact.

**Stage 3. Selection of Sampled Voters**

Using list of randomly extracted telephone numbers, one respondent was contacted in each household and asked whether he or she is above the required age for the survey. An affirmative answer meant that the interviewer would proceed to gain agreement to implement the questionnaire and a negative response meant that the interviewer would terminate the call and proceed to contact the next number on the list.

**Sample Sizes and Error Margins.**
An indicator of data quality used is the standard error of the estimate, on which the margin for sampling error is based. As survey statistics are mostly proportions, the key measure of data precision is the standard error of a proportion taken from the sample. It is computed as follows:

$$\pm Z \times \sqrt{\frac{p(1-p)}{n}}$$

Where Z, at 95% confidence level is 1.96; p is the sample proportion estimate and n is the sample size. The overall sample size of 1,505 adults in the survey gave a maximum error margin of ±2.90% at the 95% confidence level, assuming a simple random sampling design for the areas surveyed. The sampling error is at its highest when the true proportion being estimated is close to 50%.

Survey Implementation

No major events of national importance occurred during the period the survey was conducted.

With respect to survey logistics, no untoward untoward incidents were experienced. The interviewers were able to carry out their duties as planned. We thus were able to surpass the survey target and obtained additional responses above the desired 1500 respondents.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Preparation:

In developing the questionnaire, Merdeka Center first organized a focus group discussion with 11 youths from local universities and private colleges of mixed ethnic and age groups in order to understand their concerns and interests as well as their perspective on the political and social life of the nation. The focus group enabled the team to make the necessary changes and allowed greater focus on the questionnaire that was to be implemented for the survey.

The focus group was conducted on 10th May 2006 in Bangi and moderated by Merdeka Center staff members.

(1) Pre-testing and finalizing the questionnaire

Pre-testing was carried out on approximately 25 respondents prior to full roll-out of the questionnaire in the afternoon of May 24th 2006, for the purpose of checking the language and respondent comprehension of the questionnaire.
(2) **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was developed by Merdeka Center with some consultation with interlocutors in local academic and non-government organizations.

(3) **Interviewer Orientation**

(a) Interviewer briefing was conducted at Merdeka’s facility in Bangi at 10:00 am on 24th May for 18 interviewers and 6 other support personnel (comprising data entry, quality control and supervisory staff). The briefing was conducted by Merdeka Center personnel.

(b) Briefing activities consisted of:
   - A briefing to understand the objective and purpose of the project; and
   - Reading of the questionnaire to allow interviewers to clarify and receive further information on the objectives of each question.

(c) Pre-testing – after the briefing, interviewers were each tasked to contact respondents to test the applicability and clarity of the questionnaire. After each interviewer had called 2 – 3 respondents, an early evaluation session was held to determine questionnaire issues and resolve any emerging problems.

   Pre-testing took place between 4:00 pm and 6:00 pm on 24th 30th May. As a result of feedback obtained during pre-testing, several questions were amended in order to address respondent comprehension issues.

(d) Early evaluation – an evaluation session was held at 6:00 pm on after interviewers had each completed several questionnaires. The session was helpful in resolving practical issues and difficulties that interviewers encountered during the initial period of the survey exercise.

(e) Debriefing – a debriefing session conducted by Merdeka Center on 9th June, was held with 10 interviewers and 2 supervisory staff with respect to matters arising from the logistical and structural elements (e.g. unsolicited responses and feedback deemed relevant by the interviewers).

B. **Data Collection Activities**

(1) **Staff involved**

For this project, a total of 23 research assistants and staff members were involved in this assignment:
Operations coordinator  -  1
Survey supervisor    -  2
Data Entry   -  2
Data Verifiers    -  2
Telephone interviewers -  18

(2) Supervision
The survey supervisors monitored the study full-time with emphasis on logistics and general implementation. They were tasked to check on data verifiers and followed-up with surprise checks on the interviewers.

(3) Quality control
Quality control was maintained according to Merdeka Center’s specifications. The section entitled “Quality Control Procedures” below discusses this matter in greater detail.

C. Interview and Substitution
A respondent not contacted during the first attempt was contacted for a second time on the following day. If the respondent remained unavailable at the time when a second contact attempt was made, a substitute possessing the same qualities (in terms of gender and age bracket) as the original respondent was then interviewed.

In cases where the age of the person contacted was lower than the age threshold set for the survey, the interviewer would then ask if there were others in the household who met the criteria and then proceed with the interview.

In some cases, interviewers would be informed by the call recipient that the desired respondent was not available and would then proceed to set a time for call back to be made.

D. Data Processing
(1) Questionnaires completed by an interviewer were checked by data verifier for consistency and completeness. For example, the data verifier would check that all questions were answered accurately and that skip patterns were adhered to. This consistency check was conducted on each completed questionnaire prior to coding.

(2) Prior to data entry, the questionnaires were checked again before the information was encoded into the computer system
(3) A data entry computer program (SPSS) was used to conduct final verification and consistency of the encoded data before data tables were generated. These checks were made to eliminate data entry errors or transcription mistakes.

(4) Open ended responses were entered verbatim by data entry recorders in the language noted by interviewers – mostly in Bahasa Malaysia.

4. Telephone Interview Quality Control Process

The following section describes the quality control procedures put in place with respect to the telephone survey for the above project.

1. Based on the methodology and sampling frame implemented, the supervisor collected completed questionnaires by interviewers at intervals and delivered them to data verifiers.

2. Each questionnaire was then verified on the following criteria:
   a. Compliance with required survey specifications i.e. gender and location of the respondent,
   b. Completeness in implementation – has each relevant question been asked and completed?
   c. Clarity of response for open-ended questions – did the interviewer record the responses clearly and in full? Both in terms of handwriting and content for open ended and explanatory items
   d. Classification of responses – did the interviewer record responses in the appropriate spaces and along the choices provided? If it did not coincide, were explanations provided to state otherwise?

3. Questionnaires that were acceptable after verification were sent for random inspection procedures – in which case, respondents were contacted to confirm that they were interviewed and the demeanor of the interviewer. Meanwhile questionnaires that “failed” verification were sorted into those that need to be considered for either re-administration or rejection.

4. Questionnaires that were re-administered were the subjected to the same verification process once received.

5. Accepted questionnaires sent for quality inspection were sorted according to state in order to comply with sampling frame requirements.

6. Inspections were carried out not more than 3 hours after the completion of an interview. The purpose of the inspection was to act as a check on whether the interviewers followed the sampling plan and implemented the questionnaire as instructed. The inspection procedure primarily covers the following:
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a. Verification that the interview was carried out by the interviewer;
b. Random checks on questions asked, with particular emphasis on ensuring that the interviewer followed the sequence and wording of questions as listed on the questionnaire

7. Questionnaires that have been inspected and accepted were then released for data entry. Inspections which revealed problematic questionnaires were sent for consideration on whether to be re-administered or to be rejected. In several instances, questionnaires were rejected on the basis that respondents were unable to respond effectively to a majority of the questions.

8. All accepted questionnaires were then released for data entry into SPSS. All responses including open ended items were entered into the statistical software for processing.

9. Finally, when all entries were recorded on the system (SPSS), the entire dataset was subjected to a thorough detailed consistency and correctness check to ensure that information was entered correctly and matched with required specifications e.g. skip patterns on lines of questioning as well as checks to eliminate data entry errors. Once completed, the data was made available for report preparation.