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ETHNIC TOLERANCE IN MULTIETHNIC SOCIETY: THE CASE OF PULAU PINANG

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Abstract

This article discusses the level of ethnic tolerance in the multiethnic society of Malaysia, with specific reference to the parliamentary seat of Bukit Bendera, Pulau Pinang. It also aims at identifying factors that influence ethnic tolerance in the area involved. In a survey of ethnic and political tolerance of 174 respondents, this study raises the question of majority-minority tolerance in a multiethnic society. This study is crucial due to the demographic uniqueness of the particularly mentioned area in terms of the majority-minority composition of its ethnicity. The findings reveal that the people of Bukit Bendera can be categorised as medium-good practitioners of ethnic tolerance, as attitude and perceptions are more important to them than the issue of political parties and ethnicity. It is significant where moderation has progressively become Malaysia's national plan in managing a plural society. The article ends with relevant discussions and suggestions.

1. Introduction

Being applauded as an example for developing states (Lijphart, 1977; Shamsul, 2005), maintaining Malaysia's racial harmony and tolerance has become a massive task (Cheah, 2004) as its political affairs are frequently discussed through ethnic senses (Jayum A. Jawan & King, 2004; Jayum A. Jawan & Mohammad Agus, 2008). Thus, tolerance amongst ethnic groups is an elemental and essential determinant for Malaysia's political strength and stability. The outcome of the 2013 Malaysia General Elections showed only two state cities in peninsular Malaysia were won by the governing party of Barisan Nasional (BN), while the rest fell to the opposition party of Pakatan Rakyat (PR). This reflects the emergence of a new pattern among urban voters. Thus, this study was initiated to investigate the level of tolerance among ethnic groups in the Bukit Bendera parliamentary seat of Pulau Pinang state. It is significant to study this phenomenon because Bukit Bendera offers distinctive demographic factors of minority-majority relations. Most importantly, it helps researchers to devise an ethnic tolerance scale for nationwide measurement.

The definition of ethnic is derived from the Latin word *ethnicus* which means nation, people or "races". Thus, ethnic describes an assemblage of group of people that are genetically, culturally, historically related. The Oxford English Dictionary (2014) defines tolerance as "the ability or willingness to endure the existence of thoughts or behaviour that one dislikes or disagrees". Tolerance also refers to as an acceptance of others whose actions, beliefs, physical capabilities, religion, customs, ethnicity, nationality, and so on differs from one's own (American Psychological Association, 2007).

Previous researches are regularly concerned with immigrants and native groups (Cote & Erickson, 2009; Crepaz & Damron, 2008; Weldon, 2006) and religious identity (Ahmad Tarmizi, Sarjit Singh Gill, Razaleigh, & Puvaneswaran, 2013; Eisenstein, 2006; Jha, 2012). However, Wilson (2007) offered ethnic relations from social and political constructs, which compensate the concern of deficiency of literatures on inter-ethnic tolerance. It then paves to the various scholars examining measurement of ethnic tolerance. Sijuwade (2011) specifically assessed multivariate predictors of tolerance among ethnic, including gender, marital status, religiosity, income, occupation, and education. Other indicators such as inter-ethnic marriage, friendship, entertainment forms (Sijuwade, 2011), workplace (Thomsen, 2012), ethnic demography, conscious and unconsciousness (Bambulyaka, 2011), societal status (Bettelheim & Janowitz, 1949), social network and voluntary association (Cote & Erickson, 2009) and political competition (Kasara, 2013) are also often regarded as tests of ethnic tolerance with a mixture of end result. Studies also found that education, ranging from moderate to strong, contributes to tolerance measures (Statistics New Zealand, 2011) but was reported vice versa in Malaysia (Najeemah, 2006; Yasmin & Najeemah, 2010). Numerous studies in Malaysia found that socialisation to the news via media (Ezhar Tamam, Tien, Fazilah , & Azimi , 2006), and enhancing cognitive readiness, attitude, pro social behaviour and individual openness (Fazilah, 2008) positively contribute to ethnic tolerance level. On a more recent study, Nazri & Mansor (2014) found that the tolerance level has been very good at the public higher education institutions. However, "forced interaction" does not always work best as various field of studies reported that racial polarisation still exists (Abdullah Taib, 1984; Helen Ting, 2012; Mohd Ridhuan, 2010; Morsin, 1991; Mutang et al., 2014; Najeemah, 2006; Zahara, Amla, & Hardiana, 2010).

But there is still insufficient information on the ethnic tolerance in relation to ethnic voting patterns. All the above literatures confirmed that demographic indicators, including heterogeneity, contribute to the ethnic tolerance attitudes level which eventually support the democratic learning theory premises.

Studies also found that ethnic tolerance level of urbanites is higher compared to non-urban citizens (Mansor Mohd Noor, 1999; Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah, 2015; Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah & Ku Hasnita Ku Samsu, 2015; Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah, Ku Hasnita Ku Samsu, Jayum Jawan, & Sarjit Singh Gill, 2015; Mohd Nizah, Atoma, Mohd Azmir, & Paimah, 2012; Sanusi, 1989). Therefore, it is obvious that 'urban' is a significant construct in understanding the politics of Malaysian plural society. These cases have proven that ethnic factor is still a major determinant in Malaysian ethnic relations. Thus, it is imperative to study the level of tolerance among different ethnics and its implications toward their voting behaviour in elections. This is because factors like education and social interaction empirically enhance cultural integration, but not politically , which suggests that concentration on the political dimensions needs to be prioritised for analysing group competitiveness (Nazri Muslim & Mansor Mohd Noor, 2014).

In doing so, an out-group aspect is not suitable to measure the ethnic tolerance level. In fact, ethnic considerations were imparted in the political system, including constitutional, party politics and electoral system since the earliest days of Malaya independence. This study however, will measure ethnic tolerance from the perception and attitude component that later on is combined as behavioural factors of ethnic tolerance. As to date, a synonymous examination of both ethnic tolerance perception and attitude is not available. Obviously, not all citizens are ethnically and politically tolerant, but evidence has confirmed that there is still insignificant numbers of literature emphasising on ethnic tolerance behaviour, especially in developing countries. Social polarisation (Amir & Faridah , 2004; Balasubramaniam, 2006; Ramlee Mustapha, Norzaini, Faridah, Abdul Razak, & Maimun , 1999) has impeded ethnic political tolerance attitude, and thus affecting ethnic political tolerance behaviour. Ascertaining ethnic tolerance behaviour is a significant facet in managing "unity in diversity" community especially in Bukit Bendera parliamentary where majority-minority traits prevailed.

2. Problem Statement

General Elections Results in 2008 and 2013 showed distinctive pattern of ethnic politics and electoral decision among voters, especially in urban areas. Thus, understanding the factors and ascertaining the level of ethnic tolerance among voters are crucial aspects to be investigated in a multi ethnic society especially in Penang which involves minority-majority relationship.

3. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

3.1. What is the level of ethnic tolerance in the research area?

3.2. What are the types of factors that influence voters' decision in the research area?

4.   Purpose of the Study

This study was initiated to investigate the level of tolerance among the different ethnicities in Bukit Bendera parliamentary seat of Pulau Pinang state.

5.   Research Methods

This study is explanatory in nature. A quantitative design was employed using a survey method with a set of questionnaire for data collection. The sample frame for this study consists of 32,778 registered voters in Bukit Bendera constituency, and is considered as minority Malay constituency. However, voters have elected an ethnic Malay as their representative in the Malaysian parliament. Bukit Bendera is also considered an urban area (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010; Usman , Tarmiji , & Masami, 2010). Multistage clustered sampling method and simple random technique were used to select the 174 respondents of whom 128 were Chinese respondents, 25 were Malay, and 21 were Indian. In terms of gender, 124 were males, while 50 were female respondents–which resembled the demographic mixture of peninsular Malaysia.

This study employed a set of questionnaire, which contained four parts, namely demographics identification, ethnic tolerance constructs, political tolerance constructs, and voting behaviour constructs. Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 10 (totally agree) was designed. Cronbach Alpha value of 0.79 proves that the validity and reliability assumptions are met. Due to lower correlational score, 3 items were deleted (Coakes & Ong, 2011, p. 126). Data were then analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.

6.   Findings

Generally, the mean score for ethnic tolerance construct was 6.63. This score can be interpreted as medium-good, referring to the scale developed by Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah & Ku Hasnita Ku Samsu(2015). The finding echoed previous study of Nazri Muslim & Mansor Mohd Noor (2014) and Zainal, Abu, & Mohamad (2010). However, they differ in terms of respondents as both were measured in a "forced-institution" while this study was done in a day-to-day condition. Table 1 shows the analysis.

Table 01. Mean Score for Ethnic Tolerance Construct

Mean	N	Std. Deviation
6.6356	174	1.94440

Table 1 shows that respondents achieved medium-good level of ethnic tolerance. The scores are dependent on ethnicity, constituency, gender and academic qualification. Statistical analysis presented that there was a significant difference based on ethnicity.

Table 02. Ethnic Tolerance based on Ethnicity

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	77.105	2	38.553	11.426	.000
Within Groups	576.954	171	3.374		
Total	654.059	173			

Table 2 shows the result of the difference where there was a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA (F 2, 171) = 11.426, $p<.05$. Thus, Post Hoc analysis is required to determine the mean difference and size difference for the research area. (Refer to Table 3).

Table 03. Post Hoc Analysis

(I) Ethnic Group	(J) Ethnic Group	Mean Difference	Sig.
Malays	Chinese	-1.85756[*]	.000
	Indian	-1.03695	.140
Chinese	Malay	1.85756[*]	.000
	Indian	.82061	.142
Indian	Malay	1.03695	.140
	Chinese	-.82061	.142

*significant at level p=0.05

Results indicate that the level of ethnic tolerance of the Malays are lower than the Chinese in Bukit Bendera constituency by 1.858 difference. There is no significant difference of ethnic tolerance between the Malays and the Indian, and also the Chinese and the Indian. Table 4 showcased the level of ethnic tolerance, and the mean scores of each ethnic group.

Table 04. Ethnic Tolerance Norms

Ethnic Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Malay	5.1440	25	2.21399
Chinese	7.0016	128	1.79790
Indian	6.1810	21	1.56193
Total	6.6356	174	1.94440

From the above results, the Chinese ethnic tolerance mean score was highest, followed by the Indian and the Malays. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Chinese level of ethnic tolerance is better than the Indian and the Malays. These findings are synonymous with previous studies on minority-majority relationship which concluded that the majority is less tolerant compared to the minority (Ahmad Tarmizi et al., 2013; Massey, Hodson, & Sekulić, 1999). Although the above results were limited in

scope, it presented a general picture of the level of ethnic tolerance among Malaysians, particularly those in clear minority-majority ethnicities constituencies. Overall, the level of ethnic tolerance among respondents in Bukit Bendera constituency exhibited quite good level of ethnic tolerance.

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the people of Bukit Bendera can be categorised as medium-good of ethnic tolerance practitioners, as attitude and perceptions are more important than the issue of political parties and ethnicity. This result may be synonymous with previous studies (Junaidi Awang Besar et al., 2012; Mohammad Redzuan & Amer Saifude, 2013; Mohd Fuad Mat Jali et al., 2011) but interestingly, the minority is more ethnically tolerant when there is a majority ethnic in a specific constituency. Therefore, more studies on majority and mixed majority spaces are needed in measuring and understanding ethnic tolerance. Most importantly, when it involves gaining political support and harnessing votes in electoral process, definitely ethnic tolerance becomes one of the indicators, at least it prevails in urban society. Governing parties should chart new strategies for upcoming election. This is the way forward.

Acknowledgments

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