

# Dignity and Political Expectation of the Malay Electorate in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** Malays as an ethnic group makes up the majority of Malaysia's 32 million population. However, the Malays continue to feel economically and socially insecure with their position vis-à-vis other ethnicities such as the Chinese, which have led to the continued support for conservative political figures and parties. This study proposes that the Malays fear the loss of their dignity in a multicultural world more than the fear of being left behind. Previous studies have shown that the Malays are seeing the improvement of their physical and psychological well-being, and thus can be said to be living a life with dignity. Despite better conditions, the Malays are still reluctant to embrace inter-ethnic equality as it is perceived to threaten the community mindset of the Malays. Using a survey that was distributed to 458 respondents of adult Malays, this study seeks to discover the relationship between respondents' view on felt dignity and their political expectation. Based on a number of bivariate correlation analysis, it is found that while most of the Malay respondents expect it to be the government's duty to empower and protect the Malay community, there is a modest relationship between those who feel dignified and secure to be more liberal in their political expectation. The implication is that government policies should continue in uplifting the Malays as a pre-condition for a more egalitarian Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Dignity, Identity, Malay, Malaysia, Political Expectation

**Abstrak:** Orang Melayu merangkumi majoriti daripada jumlah 32 juta penduduk Malaysia. Walau bagaimanapun, orang Melayu masih berasa tidak dilindungi daripada segi ekonomi dan sosial berbanding dengan kumpulan etnik yang lain seperti orang Cina. Maka, tokoh dan parti politik konservatif

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yang kononnya berjuang untuk orang Melayu terus menerima sokongan. Kajian ini membuat hipotesis bahawa orang Melayu risau tentang kehilangan maruah mereka dalam dunia berbilang kaum. Kajian terdahulu menunjukkan bahawa kesejahteraan fizikal dan psikologi orang Melayu semakin meningkat, dan boleh dikatakan mereka menjalani kehidupan yang bermaruah. Walaupun kehidupan mereka lebih baik berbanding generasi sebelum ini, orang Melayu masih kurang bersedia dengan kesaksamaan etnik di Malaysia. Dengan menggunakan tinjauan yang disebar kepada 458 responden orang Melayu dewasa, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui hubungan antara pandangan responden terhadap maruah dan kecenderungan politik mereka. Berdasarkan analisis korelasi bivariat, didapati bahawa walaupun sebahagian besar responden mengharapkan kerajaan untuk memperkasa dan melindungi masyarakat Melayu, terdapat hubungan sederhana antara mereka yang berasa kehidupan mereka bermaruah dengan kecenderungan politik yang lebih liberal. Implikasinya adalah dasar-dasar kerajaan harus terus meningkatkan taraf kehidupan orang Melayu sebagai pra-syarat untuk mereka bersedia dengan Malaysia yang lebih adil.

**Kata Kunci:** Maruah, Identiti, Melayu, Malaysia, Kecenderungan Politik

## Introduction

In recent years, we have seen the rise of right-wing populism that favours native inhabitants over minorities in a number of developed democracies such as the United States, the Netherlands, Germany, and Spain. This phenomenon is antithetical to the assumption that a globalized world would have led people to have a more egalitarian attitude towards different groups in society. Instead, it has been argued that we are witnessing the opposite effect of such opening of borders (Fukuyama, 2018). Liberalization in the economy has forced certain groups (especially the majority) to re-evaluate their relationship with others in fear of losing their position in society. In other words, the majority group of the population is forging a defensive war to protect their dignity against being watered down by individualism that challenges the position of the community.

This discourse on identity and power has always been at the centre of Malaysian society. Malays as an ethnic group make up the majority of the population together with the Orang Asli and indigenous peoples of the Malaysian Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak, as part of the *bumiputera* ethnic group which comprises 69.3 per cent of the population

(Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). Therefore, political parties in Malaysia are cognizant of the fact that to win an election and to form a government in Malaysia, they cannot afford to dismiss this ethnic group. Politicians from both sides of the divide, the currently ruling *Perikatan Nasional* or the formerly ruling *Pakatan Harapan*, have not strayed far from this strategy of enticing the Malay electorate by making promises to them, with the former perhaps being more successful. *Pakatan Harapan*'s call for a more egalitarian Malaysia seems to not sit well with a significant portion of the Malay electorate (Free Malaysia Today, 2018) which led to its eventual demise in February 2020 and continued suspicion of its leader, Anwar Ibrahim, for his willingness to work with a party that has been accused of being anti-Malay and anti-Islam (Abdullah, 2019).

In order to understand the Malay electorate better, the objective of this study is threefold: 1) to discover the Malays' understanding of dignity; 2) to learn about the Malays' current level of satisfaction with the government; and 3) to test the relationship between respondents' view on dignity and their political expectation. The argument for this paper is that the Malay electorate is still looking for a politically conservative government to lead them because there is a fear of possibly compromising their dignity. More than just in economic terms, Malays are afraid that they are losing their dignity in the form of the special position for the Malays as defined within the constitution.

### **The Malays in Malaysia**

Based on polling data, Malay voters were almost equally split during the 2018 general election with 35 – 40 per cent voting for Barisan Nasional (precursor to today's *Perikatan Nasional*), 30 – 33 per cent voting for the Islamist *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS), and the lowest percentage, at 25 – 30 per cent, voting for *Pakatan Harapan* (Free Malaysia Today 2018). Without any doubt, this shows that *Pakatan Harapan* failed to convince the Malays of its brand of centre-left egalitarian ideology based on dignity for all. *Pakatan Harapan* is not alone on this aspiration with Muzaffar (2020) also arguing for a Malay position that is not only ethnically attached to a political party but is based on ethics and justice. The question is how ready is the Malay electorate for such a proposition? The answer is most probably no as proven in *Pakatan Harapan*'s candidates losing in three out of five by-elections since 2018 and the Sabah state election in 2020.

Despite being the majority in Malaysia, there continues to be a sense of discomfort among Malays to share resources and power with other ethnic groups, especially with the Chinese, and Pakatan Harapan may have missed the mark on this. Making it more intriguing, Malays have benefited economically since 2002 until 2014, especially the top 10 per cent who saw an 8.3 per cent growth rate compared to -0.5 per cent for the Chinese and 3.4 per cent for the Indians (Khalid and Yang 2019). Even Malays in the bottom 90 per cent saw a significant growth rate at 4.1 – 5.4 per cent. Thus, the fear by Malays to be “left behind” is categorically untrue. Not only that, but intra-ethnic inequality has also seen a downward trend for the Malays since 2009 (Lee and Choong, 2019). Of course, as argued by the authors, there might be more behind the numbers and there is no denying that the Chinese in Malaysia still holds a majority in the top one per cent. Khalid (2004) has discussed in detail how inter-ethnic disparity on assets are troubling in Malaysia with the government at the time appearing to have no plan on how to tackle this serious problem. Perhaps this explains the Malays’ dissatisfaction and a lingering fear that the community is not experiencing a fully dignified life in a country where they make up the majority population.

Besides the economy, it seems that there is another fear that is holding back the Malays from supporting a politically liberal government. Mokhtar (2020) argued that it is due to dignity, or lack there-of, as no one can truly point to a person or entity that is directly threatening the position of the Malays. Malay politicians understood this conundrum and for that reason several important Malay political figures from across the bench attended the so-called ‘Malay Dignity Congress’ in October 2019, thus underscoring the importance of dignity, or *maruah* in the Malay language, to the community.

Hamayotsu (2013) has argued that the rise of civil and political societies that stresses equality has put traditional and religious elites in Malaysia on the defensive. While Malays continue to make up a larger portion of the country’s population, there is a fear that they are losing their identity in a globalized world. In other words, Malay identity is slowly giving way to a more liberalized identity where dignity is found in every individual, and not based on position or authority.

## Dignity and Identity in a Democracy

As a concept, dignity has had multiple iterations and definitions. Prior to the Enlightenment period, dignity is assumed in Judeo-Christian tradition as the innate value of humans that require respect and service from one another. In Islam, the Qur'an also mentions the term *'izzah* which may mean honour or dignity of humans<sup>1</sup>. Currently, dignity as a concept is highly related to contemporary discourse on human rights<sup>2</sup>. Immanuel Kant's definition of dignity as human's inherent worth as a species became the touchstone for the conceptualization of human rights. We are meant to respect the rights of fellow men and women not for any other reason except for the fact that they are human beings that deserve dignity. Universal dignity is inherent in humans due to us having conscience and autonomy unlike other beings. Ober (2012) writes that "Living with dignity . . . entails having one's claims recognized and respected by others, having some measure of control over one's life, having a say in decisions, and having some responsibility for one's choices." (p. 831)

Besides the usefulness of dignity in understanding human rights, it may also be useful to track the development of the debate on dignity prior to the Enlightenment. Tierney (1997) has even written about the origin of human rights from the twelfth century when they were called "natural" rights. Sensen (2011) has argued that the understanding of dignity today to support the conception of human rights differ from the traditional understanding of dignity. According to traditional conception by thinkers such as the Roman Cicero, Leo the Great and

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<sup>1</sup> See Qur'an 17:70 translated as "And We have certainly honoured the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference."

<sup>2</sup> See McCrudden, C. (2008). Human Dignity and Judicial Interpretation of Human Rights. *European Journal of International Law*, 19(4), pp. 655-724; Hughes, G. (2011). The Concept of Dignity in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 39(1), pp. 1-24; Gilibert, P. (2015). Human Rights, Human Dignity, and Power. In Rowan Cruft, Matthew Liao & Massimo Renzo (eds.), *Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 196-213; Nascimento, A. & Lutz-Bachmann, M. (2018). *Human dignity: perspectives from a critical theory of human rights*. Abingdon, Oxon & New York, NY: Routledge.

the Italian Pico, what was termed as ‘initial dignity’ is the understanding of humans’ position being elevated due to their capacities for reason and freedom. ‘Realized dignity’ on the other hand is based on morality whereby humans have an expected duty to realize our ‘initial dignity’.

Moreover, Bayesfky (2013) writes of three understandings of dignity according to Kant’s perspectives: (1) that dignity belongs to humans and not positions, (2) that dignity is equally applied to every human, and (3) that dignity is inherent rather than given by society. It was argued that Kant does not disregard honour in favour of dignity and that the Kantian conception of dignity supports human rights by taking into consideration a person’s autonomy and his or her place within society. This has been a point of contention because dignity to some is a concept that is only applicable in a liberal-democratic society without consideration for the more traditional views on society.

From their observation on the impact of the ideal type of liberal, minimal, traditional, communist, corporatist and developmental regimes on autonomy, equality, privacy, social conflict, and the definition of societal membership, Howard and Donnelly (1986) concluded that our conception of human rights based on human dignity may only be applied in either an ideal or minimal liberal regime. Mattson and Clark (2011) further supported this notion that there are other societies which have more communitarian cultures that are less likely to embrace individual rights over their perceived importance of duties and obligations to society. This makes it difficult to argue for the significant value of human rights. The Malays in Malaysia are suspected to be traditionalists, and thus it is part of this research to gauge if individual dignity is indeed tied to a person’s role in society.

Having realized the multiple conceptions of dignity, Mattson and Clark (2011) proposed to understand the different definitions of dignity as a starting point to find common ground that is acceptable to all kinds of cultures throughout the world besides the liberal-democratic West. They looked at four conceptions of dignity in order to improve policy-making decisions by governments: as a metaphysical explanation, a virtuous conduct, a stereotyping of the “other”, and a subjective experience. Based on Mattson and Clark’s conclusion that values are a good starting point to talk about the experience of dignity, this present study also employs their four conceptions of dignity to understand

the values that are most important to the Malay community in their understanding of dignity. This supports the idea that as wealth continues to increase among the Malays, they appear to be seeking another value that relates to their expectation on the government.

Lasswell and McDougal (1992) goes further and suggested three conditions to achieve dignity in a community. First, most of the people in the community are involved in the decision-making process; second, the community works together to fulfil their expectations; and thirdly, everybody benefits from the outcomes. Based on these criteria, it is currently questionable if dignity is fully achieved by Malays in Malaysia as only a small fraction of the population is involved in decision-making and definitely not every Malay is currently basking in the positive result of either the economy or politics.

Furthermore, as argued by Kateb (2011), human's stature of having dignity in relation to other species has been recognized in traditional conception of dignity. However, it is the status of individuals being equal that has a much more recent history. Lagon and Arend (2014) proposed a working definition of dignity as requiring "social recognition of each person's inherent value and claim to equal access to opportunity. To be meaningful, human dignity must be institutionalized in practice and governance." (p. 16) This definition is useful for this study to understand the role of the Malaysian government in allowing Malays equal opportunity to thrive and thus experience what is called felt dignity.

The question on Malay dignity relates to the concept of Malay identity itself and how it is juxtaposed against other ethnic identities in Malaysia. What is the prospect of dignity and equality in Malaysia today? While the country is known as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, there is no doubt that Malays hold a special position by law as written in Article 153 of the constitution. Interestingly, according to Kahn (2005), the concept of a Malay race that is territorially based is relatively recent as a result of political modernisation, nationalisation and universalisation. In other words, Malays were racialized to further their dignity in order to reach a supposed universal standard of a good life<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See Robcis (2016) on the idea of dignity as a concept to establish national belonging in France and to ensure public order. See Snyder (2012) on multivalent



As consolidated democracies continue to struggle with multiculturalism as observed in Europe and America today, Malaysia has always had its own set of unique experiences since independence. However, as argued by Fortman (2011), it is not the majority-minority relationship that is causing political instability; in fact, it is “the construction of dominant positions based on collectively exclusive elements and the actual abuse of such positions” (p. 276) that is causing harm and damage to the country. There is a need to move away from current discourse on minority rights and instead reconceptualize minority rights on the idea of universal dignity to reduce further violation of rights.

Another question to ask is what is the basis for such strong communal feeling of identity among the different groups in Malaysia, especially the Malays? Klandermans (2014) argued that majority groups are more likely to have a politicized collective identity because they identify better with a superordinate entity, which is the nation. Whereas Aroopala (2012) shows through voting game laboratory experiment that a group reaching 50% of the electorate are more likely to view its participation as important. Using Aristotle’s idea as a framework, Ober (2013) suggested that while problems may arise when the interest of the individual diverges from the interest of the group, the best life for a community is for each person in the group to be able to reach his or her potential through living with dignity. Malays are perhaps much more sensitive to the well-being of the community than that of individual advantage. After all, it was Aristotle who said that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

But are Malays truly just altruistic in choosing to prioritize the community over the self? Whitehouse and Lanman (2014) hypothesized two reasons for this seemingly altruistic action: (1) the construction of identity based on shared experiences, and (2) finding others with similar values or beliefs. The latter explains the Malays’ strong ties because of a shared custom and religion with its own values and belief system. This is not unique to the Malays as any member of a particular social group would prioritize people from the same group over others.

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identities among Blacks in America to understand why it is important not to abandon Malay as an identity but to allow it to co-exist with a person’s other identities.



Social psychologists have also discussed the theory of identity fusion whereby there is no clear boundary between the personal and social identity of a person (Swann, Jetten, Gomez, Whitehouse and Bastian, 2012). The authors mention local and external fusions, where the former is based on shared experiences, and explains identity fusion in smaller groups such as a tribe. In a larger group such as the roughly 21 million Malays in Malaysia, the authors suggest that the people project ties based on local fusion on a larger group. Groups with highly fused individuals are more empowered because they take on the concerns of the group upon themselves.

Therefore, in a multicultural society such as Malaysia, Taylor (1992) suggested the need for a politics of equal dignity based on autonomy, as well as politics of difference based on authenticity. Using university literary canon and Quebecois' cultural and language survival, Taylor defends the need for multiculturalism. Emerging out of traditional idea of honour, Taylor stresses dignity as the basis for group rights. Using Taylor's idea, dignity might also be the basis for the preservation of Malay rights by encouraging a politics of universalism that defends the dignity of every Malaysian citizen.

Cooke (2009) took a divergent approach by arguing that the politics of difference is not based on universal values. Using examples from the Slow Food movement, Welsh-language initiatives and Assembly for the Protection of Hijab, Cooke offered four interpretations for the politics of recognition: (1) that the value does not necessarily be universal but for everyone to agree it is valuable to some; (2) that there is an invitation to see the world differently; (3) that agreement is not possible but it may affect our actions; and (4) that recognition is always contested even if it has been institutionalized.

Dignity is an important concept in democracy because as Taylor (1994) writes,

It is obvious that this concept of dignity is the only one compatible with a democratic society, and that it was inevitable that the old concept of honor was superseded. But this has also meant that the forms of equal recognition have been essential to democratic culture. (p. 27)

In a democratic system whereby one person equals one vote, each citizen is to be acknowledged as equal. As Howard and Donnelly (1986)

put it, a liberal regime may protect human dignity through equal concern and respect. For that reason, dignity has been used for the defence of both sides of issues ranging from abortion, to bioethics, and gay rights (McCrudden, 2013). Ober (2012) even argues that democracy requires not just liberty and equality, but also dignity as a public good that requires citizens to defend it consciously and actively.

The debate on dignity and democracy is truly relevant today because we have seen in western democracies whereby the majority white population feels threatened by minority groups such as immigrants and African Americans. Europe's experiment to reduce nationalism has threatened the people's sense of dignity based on national identity (Lawler, 2010). As a result, Fukuyama (2020) writes about the two different directions that the world is moving in. The first is a distrust in authorities and public institutions in democratic countries due to social fragmentation. The second trend is a resurgence of centralized and conservative power in authoritarian countries.

Malaysia, currently being torn between greater democratization and regressing into former authoritarianism, is facing a greater unknown. Middle income Malaysians are losing a sense of dignity because even having middle-class values and levels of education, they are still finding difficulties finding employment or to be rid of debt. This is further emphasized when the previous government introduced the Goods and Services Tax (GST) which shows that the Malays have buying power yet not enough for a more comfortable life. Therefore, as argued by Krastev (2014), people protested the situation which led to the result of the 2018 general election in Malaysia where the ruling Barisan Nasional was toppled for the first time in the nation's history. However, since the people's 'success' was helped by elites such as Mahathir Mohamad and Muhyiddin Yassin, it becomes clear that there is no real alternative besides the elites who can guarantee the protection of Malay dignity. In other words, power has not escaped to the masses yet.

From the literature there is no doubt that even a majority population in a democratic country may experience a sense of misplaced dignity. This is possible when the people's inherent worth becomes questionable due to the policies or rhetoric by the government and elites that perpetuate the Malays' fear of losing their place in society. In order to protect their dignity which is rooted in their identity, the Malays seek to distinguish

themselves from the larger population. As argued by Taylor, this is part and parcel of a multicultural and democratic nation. Present literature is filled with the discussion on dignity as it concerns human rights and democracy. However, there has been no specific research done on how dignity is conceived by Malays as a majority group in Malaysia and subsequently their expectation on the government to ensure their dignity is not compromised.

### **Methodology**

Given the nature of the topic, dignity as a concept deserves to be investigated under a framework of philosophical analysis. However, the purpose of this paper is to gain empirical evidence on the Malay electorate's understanding on the concept of dignity and how their understanding affects their political expectation on the government. In recent times, it appears as if there are many who are speaking on behalf of the Malays from both sides of the political divide. Elites on the right continue to claim that Malays are very conservative whereas elites on the left want us to believe that there are more progressive and moderate Malays than we are allowed to believe.

Unfortunately, besides polling data on voting choices of the Malays, there is no data on the political expectations of Malays on the left-right ideological spectrum in relations to their view on dignity. It is important to discover where Malays lie in the left-right debate as it will inform future direct of government policies. To fill this gap, this paper is based on a quantitative research done through online surveys distributed to a sample of 458 adult Malays in Malaysia. In 2019, Parliament passed an amendment to lower the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. Even though it will take a few years before eighteen-year-olds could vote, those who are already of age in 2020 would be able to vote in the next general election. There are roughly 15.12 million adult Malays in Malaysia (69.3 per cent over 21.82 million<sup>4</sup>).

The margin of error was calculated to be 4.58 per cent with a 95 per cent confidence interval. Since non-probability sampling technique of convenient sampling was used in completing this study, we unfortunately cannot generalize the findings to the population. Nevertheless, it is

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<sup>4</sup> Data from Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/667521/number-of-adults-in-malaysia/>

believed that the data may be useful to develop a working hypothesis on the issue of dignity in Malay political expectation for further investigation in the future. The emphasis here is on developing an idea rather than on coming to a definite conclusion.

In terms of demography, equal number of respondents answered male and female at 49.8 per cent each (two missing). Most of the respondents are between the ages of 21 and 35 (62.4 per cent), had urban hometowns (43.2 per cent), currently lives in urban areas (55.7 per cent), have an income of less than RM2000 (31.3 per cent), have a Bachelor's degree (54.6 per cent), married (50.0 per cent), and employed full-time (53.5 per cent).

The four main constructs of the study are: understanding of dignity, priorities of the Malays, satisfaction with the government, and political expectation of Malay voters (divided into liberal and conservative expectation). Besides question on priorities of the Malays, all the other constructs had multiple items on a five-point ordinal scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Since this study is based on respondents' perception and understanding, it is believed that a five-point scale is adequate in order to not confuse respondents on such a complex issue. For priorities of the Malays, respondents were asked to choose which of two statements are more important to them. This is done to further test respondents' view on the concept of dignity.

Table 1: Alpha Coefficient

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Cronbach alpha coefficient</b>
Understanding of dignity	0.511 (3 items)
Satisfaction with the government	0.835 (5 items)
Liberal political expectations	0.523 (4 items)
Conservative political expectation	0.702 (4 items)

Two variables, understanding of dignity and liberal political expectation, have an alpha value of above 0.5, which can be considered as having moderate reliability (Hinton, Brownlow, McMurray and Cozens, 2004). On the other hand, the alpha coefficient for variables on satisfaction with the government and conservative political expectation show high reliability.

Due to the inability to generalize the result to the population, the data was mostly analysed for the frequencies of answer by respondents. In addition, a bivariate correlation analysis was also performed to test the hypothesis of the relationship between a voter’s perception of felt dignity with his or her political expectation. It is hypothesized that a respondent who are satisfied with the government is more likely to have a liberal political expectation. It is presumed that the more satisfied they are, the more dignified they may feel and thus they are less likely to hold a binary view of “us” against “them”. This paper is hoped to be able to generate a hypothesis for future research that could include some form of qualitative research methodology.

## Findings

### *Malays’ Understanding of Dignity*

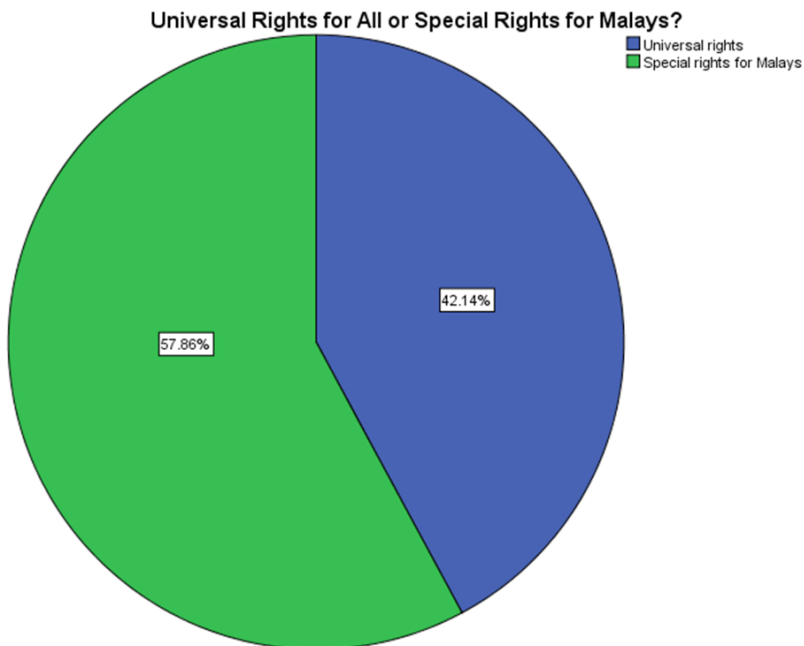
Before we can test the relationship between dignity and the Malays’ political expectation, it is imperative to discover the respondents’ understanding on the concept of dignity itself. From the conceptual framework of dignity presented by Mattson and Clark (2011), statements relating to dignity were inserted into the questionnaire. Table 2 provides an overview of their answers.

Table 2: Percentage of respondents’ perception on the definition of dignity

	Mean	SD	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Dignity means all humans deserve similar rights	3.40	1.29	9.6	19.4	14.8	33.8	22.3
Dignity depends on an individual’s ability to make choices	3.68	1.11	7.2	9.0	12.0	52.0	19.9
Dignity is achieved when we can fulfil our duties	3.40	1.19	8.1	17.2	18.3	39.3	17.0

From Table 2 we can see that a majority of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the understanding of dignity as widely discussed in the literature. Consistently, at least 56.1 percent of respondents agree and strongly agree with statements that dignity means everybody deserves similar rights, dignity is based on our ability to make choices, and dignity is achieved when we fulfil society's expectations. Overall, it appears as if the Malays do believe that dignity is a universal human right.

Figure 1



However, from Figure 1, we see that when the question is worded differently by replacing dignity with rights, a majority of respondents are more supportive of special rights for Malays than they do the idea of universal rights for all. While there appears to be a contradiction in the findings, perhaps it may be suggested that the Malays believe in the inherent value of human dignity. Nevertheless, the concept of rights, as bestowed by the government, do not necessarily have to be shared as they depend on the nuances of the society. This supports the argument

that even though Malays have seen their livelihood, and thus dignity, improve over the decades, there is still fear of losing their special rights as enshrined in the constitution as that relates more to the political environment in Malaysia.

*Malays' Satisfaction with the Government*

Next, this study seeks to discover how the Malays feel towards the role of the Malaysian government in defending and upholding Malay dignity. Six statements on the Malaysian government were presented based on the argument that the fulfilment of these values would lead to a feeling of collective dignity (Mattson and Clark 2011). This is an important question because dignity has been used as an excuse to defend Malay special rights. If the Malay community continues to hark on the possibility of losing their dignity, it is hypothesized that it might be due to their dissatisfaction with what the government has done so far. But if government policies have helped improve Malays' livelihood, we can say that Malays have lived a dignified life in Malaysia.

Table 3: Percentage of respondents' satisfaction on the government's role in upholding Malay dignity

<b>The Malaysian government has...</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>prioritized the physical well-being of Malays</b>	3.43	0.99	4.6	12.0	29.9	42.4	11.1
<b>provided opportunities for Malays to be self-reliant</b>	3.61	0.94	3.7	8.3	23.8	51.3	12.9
<b>provided opportunities for Malays to seek personal happiness</b>	3.60	0.92	3.5	7.6	26.4	50.4	12.0
<b>provided opportunities for Malays to improve their skills</b>	3.94	0.87	1.7	6.1	11.8	57.0	23.4
<b>provided opportunities for Malays to increase wealth</b>	3.57	1.03	5.0	10.5	21.8	48.0	14.6



The Malaysian government has...	Mean	SD	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
provided opportunities for Malays to hold power in government or the private sector	3.75	0.93	2.8	6.6	21.4	51.1	18.1

Based on Table 3, it appears that a majority of respondents (more than 53.5 per cent) agree and strongly agree that the Malaysian government as an institution has done its role in uplifting the Malays. With a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.835, the items in this construct is considered reliable to test respondent's satisfaction with the government. When asked on the government's role in prioritizing Malays' physical well-being, providing Malays with the opportunities to be self-reliant, to seek happiness, to improve their skills, to increase wealth and to hold power in the public or private sector, a majority of respondents either agree or strongly agree with positive statements on the government.

Again, this finding supports the argument that the Malays as a community have actually seen and experienced a good life at least since the past 50 years. Yet, how can dignity of the Malay community become a constant rallying cry come election year? If the Malays genuinely believe that the community is left behind, we should expect to see more respondents having negative perception on the government. However, that is not the case. This mismatch on respondents' perception and politicians' rhetoric of protecting Malay dignity is quite baffling.

### *Malays' Political Expectation*

One of the objectives of this study is to discover the political expectation of the respondents, whether they fit more on the left or right side of the political spectrum. Rather than directly asking for their ideological leaning, in which it is assumed that respondents would be reluctant to answer or even unsure of the definition, this study asks a total of eight questions on the respondents' preference of issues relevant to the left-right debate. While the Cronbach's Alpha value for liberal expectation is low at 0.523, the Cronbach's Alpha value for conservative expectation is high at 0.702. Due to the multidimensionality of liberalism as a

concept, there is perhaps poor interrelatedness among the test questions. However, the items of conservative values are much more correlated.

Table 4: Percentage of respondents' expectation on the Malaysian government

	Mean	SD	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>I believe the government should provide equal opportunity for every Malaysian citizen</b>	3.54	1.06	4.4	12.0	26.9	38.5	18.2
<b>I believe the government should empower individuals to solve their own problems</b>	3.47	0.99	2.8	13.5	31.4	37.8	14.4
<b>I believe in income redistribution</b>	3.79	0.96	2.6	5.0	27.9	40.0	24.5
<b>I believe in reforming the political system and institution</b>	3.64	1.07	4.1	9.4	28.8	33.6	24.0
<b>I believe the government's authority should not be limited</b>	2.99	1.08	9.2	24.0	33.4	25.8	7.6
<b>I believe the government should focus on empowering Malays</b>	3.7	1.05	4.1	7.9	26.4	37.3	24.2
<b>I believe the government should uphold Malay identity in Malaysia</b>	3.9	1.03	3.5	5.2	21.4	37.3	32.5
<b>I believe in maintaining status quo on social issues</b>	3.57	0.98	3.5	8.3	32.3	39.5	16.4

From Table 4 we can see that a majority of respondents either agree or strongly agree with most statements that relate to both liberal and conservative expectations. This point is punctuated by response on the government's authority. For the statement "I believe the government's authority should not be limited", almost equal percentage of respondents

agree (25.8 per cent) and disagree (24.0 per cent). The respondents are divided on whether they prefer a stronger or weaker government.

We can infer from this that the Malay respondents hold both liberal and conservative expectations. Similar to other parts of the world, Malays as an ethnic group are not ideologically monolith. Furthermore, to assume that the Malays are conservative without acknowledging more liberal leanings may also not be strategically wise for Malay politicians. This finding supports the earlier result on the respondents' understanding of dignity. While they agree that dignity is for all (liberal), Malay rights continue to trump universal rights (conservative). In other words, however liberal the respondents are in wanting equality, reform, and income redistribution, when it comes to matters of Malay identity, the respondents hold conservative views.

#### *Dignity and Malay Political Expectation*

This study also seeks to test the relationship between respondents' understanding of dignity and their political expectation. Pearson's correlation was run among the different constructs to test whether there is a substantive and statistically significant relationship between the different items. The first correlation analysis is between respondents' priority on statements relating to dignity with their political expectations. Although these results may not be generalized to the population of Malay voters at large given its non-probability sampling method, it still provides an interesting glimpse among the Malay respondents to this survey.

The result shows that there seems to be a statistically significant relationship between a person prioritizing Malay rights (third row/item in table 5) with his or her expectation on conservative values with  $p < .01$  for all four items under the conservative construct. Furthermore, the magnitude of the relationship is approximately moderate for three items with an  $r$  (Pearson's correlation) of between 0.3 and 0.5 (Ratner, 2009; 'Learn About Pearson's Correlation', 2015). This is not surprising as it is expected that respondents who prioritize rights for the Malays would have a more conservative expectation from the government.

Table 5: Correlations between respondents' priorities on dignity with their conservative expectations

		I believe the government's authority should not be limited	I believe the government should focus on empowering Malays	I believe the government should uphold Malay identity in Malaysia	I believe in maintaining status quo on social issues
Dignity means to act according to social expectation	Pearson Correlation	.076	.180**	.248**	.173**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.104	.000	.000	.000
	N	458	458	458	458
Dignity means we should always strive for consensus	Pearson Correlation	.046	.107*	.036	.074
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.322	.021	.439	.113
	N	458	458	458	458
Dignity means special rights for Malays	Pearson Correlation	.190**	.457**	.440**	.372**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	458	458	458	458
Dignity means every individual should be respected based on status or authority	Pearson Correlation	.127**	.073	.065	.111*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.117	.167	.018
	N	458	458	458	458

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 Level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed).

There are statistically significant relationships with a  $p < .01$  between respondents who prioritize acting according to social expectations with three items under the construct on conservative political expectation. Although the  $r$  is relatively weak, the result still shows that Malay respondents who believe dignity is based on acting according to social norms would more likely prefer a government that maintains the status quo on social issues.

An interesting pattern was observed when data from respondents' satisfaction with the government was analysed in correlation with data on their political expectation. It is hypothesized that if the

Malay respondents are already satisfied with the performance of the government so far, the respondents should feel secured with the position of Malays in Malaysia. And if the respondents are already secured with Malay position in Malaysia, they should be more likely to hold political expectations that benefit Malaysians without regard for ethnicity. In other words, if they feel dignified, they may be more likely to support more egalitarian government policies.

Table 6: Relationship between satisfaction with the government political expectations

		<b>Correlations</b>		
		Satisfaction with the government	Conservative political expectation	Liberal political expectation
Satisfaction with the government	Pearson Correlation	1	.089	.326**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.057	.000
	N	458	458	458
Conservative political expectation	Pearson Correlation	.089	1	-.072
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.057		.126
	N	458	458	458
Liberal political expectation	Pearson Correlation	.326**	-.072	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.126	
	N	458	458	458

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From Table 6 on the relationship between the identified constructs, we see that the hypothesis is accepted with a moderate substantive significance at  $p < .01$ . The more satisfied the respondents are with the government, the more likely they are to have a liberal political expectation on the government. Therefore, when Malays feel that they are living a life of dignity with their needs being met by the government, they appear to be more willing to share equal opportunity with all Malaysians irrespective of ethnicity or religion.

However, when we zoom into the data, it is observed that there is also a positive relationship between the respondents' satisfaction with the government and their political expectation when it comes to Malay

issues. The more respondents agree that the government has upheld Malay dignity, the more likely they are to expect it is the government's duty to further empower and protect Malay position. For example, the relationship between respondents' satisfaction with the government for providing opportunities to the Malays to be self-reliant and for allowing the Malays to seek personal happiness are significant at the 0.01 level with their expectation for the government to uphold Malay identity. However, the magnitude of the relationship is approximately weak with an  $r$  of less than 0.3.

### **Discussion**

This study attempts to understand how Malays perceived the highly philosophical concept of dignity. From the data gathered, cognitively, the Malay respondents show an understanding of dignity as a concept that is applicable to all human beings. However, given that dignity is currently discussed in the context of human rights, this study asks respondents if they view rights similarly to dignity. The data shows that even though dignity is believed to be a universal value, a majority of respondents still prioritize special rights for the Malays in Malaysia's specific socio-cultural context. Thus, this explains the presence of both conservative and liberal rhetoric by Malay politicians as they try to maximize their political mileage.

Being the majority in Malaysia's population, how is it possible that rhetoric of the Malays being left behind continue to dominate discussion on ethnic relations in Malaysia? If the Malays are seeing better days than their parents due to government policies, why are calls to protect Malay dignity continue to ring loudly going into the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? When that data is analysed, it seems that the Malay respondents are actually satisfied with the government's handling on matters regarding Malay dignity thus far. In other words, a majority of the respondents are satisfied with the government's role in providing opportunities for Malays to have a more dignified life. This is especially true following the New Economic Policy introduced in 1970 which was effectively an affirmative action programme to reduce racial inequality but has also been criticised as favouring Malays across the board including those from higher socioeconomic status. Despite the criticism there is no doubt that the NEP has successfully brought a significant portion of Malays into higher living standards. It may be argued that the

idea of Malay backwardness is so ingrained in the Malay psyche despite experiencing better living standard over the years. Thus, they still hold conservative views when it comes to Malay position in the country.

It is argued in this paper that it is not so much that the Malays feel undignified, but it is about them wanting to maintain the status quo as it has benefited the Malays for at least the past 50 years. The fear that the Malays have today is not about being left behind as amplified by right-wing Malay nationalists (Tun Tuah, 2019), but a fear that they might lose the advantage they have gained. Malay politicians who understand this continue to use an invisible bogeyman, such as the Chinese-based secular Democratic Action Party (DAP) that is allegedly challenging Malay dignity, in order to win the hearts and minds of the Malay population without having to produce concrete data on a supposed loss of dignity. As long as the Malays continue to have this fear of losing (not necessarily gaining) their identity, politicians who are able to speak the conservative language with promises of reform will have an advantage among Malay voters.

The Malays holding both liberal and conservative expectations perhaps best explain the difficulty of any current Malay-based political party in Malaysia to capture a majority of Malay vote. On the right, the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), PAS, and currently Bersatu, claim to be protector of Malay rights. However, the Malays are also ready for political change and systematic reforms, which is best embodied by parties such as Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Amanah (which has even been called neoconservative<sup>5</sup>). It may not be a stretch to claim that Malays want a strong government that can ensure both liberty and stability. The Malays continue to support conservative agenda for practical reasons, even if they may hold liberal beliefs. Given this understanding, the battle for the Malay vote is wide open and it is anyone's guess which party will come out victorious in the next general election.

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<sup>5</sup> See Wan Jan, Wan Saiful. (2017). Evolution of Islamism in Malaysian Politics: The Splintering of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and the Spread of Progressive Ideas [Paper presentation]. Istanbul Network 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference Paper 2017: Democratic Transitions in the Muslim World, Kuala Lumpur.



Perhaps, instead of forcing a creation of a national identity that might forsake each ethnicity's unique identity, it is time for Malaysians to look further and find similarities with other persons beyond the border. Decades after independence, it has become clear that Malaysians of all ethnicities are rather unwilling to abandon their own tradition, culture, and language. Therefore, a Malaysian identity should be one that truly celebrates these differences without trying to assimilate one another. However, there is still a need to find common ground; it can be done by respecting one another as a citizen of a globalized world that similarly seeks dignity, respect, honour, and security.

### **Conclusion**

While this study shows statistically significant relationship between respondents' perceived dignified living with their political expectation, the substance of the relationship is unclear as respondents expect both progress as well as tradition. It also must be emphasized again that the result from this study cannot be generalized to the entire population of Malay voters, but it has produced a working hypothesis that could possibly be expanded into a larger survey. The best conclusion to be made from the findings is that the rhetoric of enshrining Malay dignity still rings true to a lot of Malay voters regardless of where they are on the conservative-liberal political spectrum.

This study also provides better insight on the current political situation in Malaysia in which Malay voters seem to be split between the ruling Perikatan Nasional and the previous Pakatan Harapan government which ruled for less than two years. Since Malays are expecting both the maintenance of status quo and further progress, the fluidity that the different political parties hold will benefit them compared to if they were to hold a strong stance on either end of the conservative-liberal divide. This does not make Malay politicians in Malaysia less principled; in fact, this strategy confirms them as politicians in line with their colleagues in other parts of the world. More importantly, the Malaysian government needs to continue making the Malay populace dignified by providing opportunity for the Malays to improve their lives. Only then will they be more likely to have a liberal political expectation that supports equality for all, irrespective of race or religion, leading to substantive national harmony and peace.

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