

# Public Perception and Confidence Level towards Current Ruling Government: A Case Study in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

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## Abstract

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit globally, it threatened not only the healthcare systems and all industries but also the management of any government and therefore, the political situation in some countries. Hence, this study aims to determine the level of confidence level towards the current ruling government, to know the factor of public perception and to identify the relationship between public acceptance and level of confidence. Quantitative research in correlational nature will be carried out and the respondents within Kuching, Sarawak city area will be selected in this study. Data collected will be analyzed using SPSS Statistical software to calculate the necessary data. To know the level of confidence, the data will be analyzed descriptively based on mean and standard deviation. To determine the factor of level of confidence, it will be based on trust, COVID-19 management, and leadership as a factor. Pearson Correlation analysis will be used to determine the relationship between public perception and level of confidence. The findings of this study will be useful in determining the confidence level of the current ruling government which will illustrate the support of the public towards the government and indicate political stability in the country.

**Keywords:** Confidence Level, Ruling Government, Public Acceptance, Trust, Covid-19 Management, Leadership

## Introduction

For the first time in Malaysian political history, a change of government took place without a general election. The sudden turn of the political parties and some ministers of Parliament enable them to form the new government and become rulers. This unprecedented event has drawn mixed reactions from many people. Right after the Perikatan Nasional (PN) became a government, a total of 27 civil society civil associations condemned the move to form the backdoor government. One of them known as The Coalition for Clean and Fair Election or

called BERSIH has voiced out that they are against any 'backdoor' government especially one that formed midterm and rejects the mandate of people given to the Pakatan Harapan (The Star, 2020).

According to BERSIH's chairman, Thomas Fann said that "To us, this is undemocratic and a betrayal of the people's trust in the government they voted for." He also stressed that Muhyiddin should not become the Prime Minister because the support that he gets came from leaders who were rejected from the previous General Election (UMNO and PAS). The other reason for this disagreement is when the PN is formed together with many of them were being charged in court for corruption UMNO was labelled as a scandal plague party with his disgraced ex-leader. Knowing that Muhyiddin will be sworn in as the Prime Minister, some Malaysian protest by immediately doing the hashtag "NotMyPM" on their Twitter. There was a small group of people making public protests around Kuala Lumpur noticed and expressed that they do not agree with how the coalition took over the government. The PN's legitimacy was not yet challenged in the parliament. And now it's the first time in history that Malaysia suspended its parliamentary activities due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This once again raises dissatisfaction among other political leaders and the public. What is even more surprising, the current Prime Minister and his cabinet resigned only after 17 months in power. On 16th Aug 2020, Malaysia once again watched the resignation of the Prime Minister.

Hence this study aims to investigate the perception of the public in a selected area about PN governance. Most study related to the public perception towards the government is only conducted in West Malaysia. Therefore, this study is intended to collect the public's perception from East Malaysia's perspectives. In this research, the focus will be on seeking public perception towards the PN government. The communities that will be selected as respondents are among the public who are staying in the Kuching district. The proposed areas are chosen because due to their diverse cultural background. The territory in this study refers to a place whereby it is in Kuching, Sarawak one of the major cities in East Malaysia and the capital city of Sarawak.

### **Literature Review**

Baier (1986), stated that trust involves the conviction that, to the extent possible, others will care for our interests, and that they will not take advantage of or damage us. Trust, therefore, implies personal vulnerability induced by ambiguity about others' future actions, we cannot be sure, but we assume that they will be benign or at least not malignant and act accordingly in a way that may put us at risk.

#### *Trust*

The term "trust" is fraught with uncertainty, since according to Han et al (2020) "trust has never been a topic of mainstream sociology". Despite extensive research, there is still a consensus. There appears to be a gap in the accepted working definition of trust (Lewis & Weigert 1985). The idea of trust is highly related to risks and expectations: trust is used as a replacement for risk. But trust creates risks to the truster. Meanwhile, Baier (1986) stated that trust involves the conviction that, to the extent possible, others will care for our interests, and that they will not take advantage or damage us. Trust, therefore, implies personal vulnerability induced by ambiguity about others' future actions, we cannot be sure, but we assume that they will be benign or at least not malignant and act accordingly in a way that may put us at risk. Therefore, this implies there is no certainty. Since people are facing an increase in uncertainty, the explanation of the increase in distrust as a result of evolution to

a post-modern society sounds very reasonable. Han et al (2020) added that to reduce uncertainty, trust is used: To show trust is to foresee the future. It is to behave as though the future were definite. Sztopka (1991) come out with a simpler definition as trust is a gamble on the actions of people in the future. Institutions have been created as an implication that direct and personal relationships in which are not always possible. Trust has three dimensions according to Lewis & Weigert (1985): Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioural. The cognitive process does not state that more knowledge will lead to greater trust, but rather that it is based on a choice: at some point, a (socially defined) decision is made not to accept any more evidence or rational reasons. When trust is betrayed, the emotional foundation is exposed, as trust often necessitates significant emotional investment. "Behaviorally to trust is to act as if the uncertain future actions of others were indeed certain in circumstances where the violation of these expectations result in negative consequences for those involved" (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). There are various types of trust, each of which demonstrates a unique blend of emotion and logic. Levi (1996) separates two main streams of trust research: those who claim that social bonds are the foundation of trust, and others who claim that trust is based on an encapsulated interest (estimates of the probability that others will reciprocate cooperation) approach. Houston and Harding (2013) define trust as "a willingness to rely on others to act on our behalf based on the belief that they possess the capacity to make effective decisions and take our interests into account. Thus, trust involves risk since there is no certainty about future outcomes (Gambetta 2000). Trust in government is thought to be generally associated with the government's ability to deliver services, maintain economic growth, protect citizens, and resolve basic 9 social issues (Nye, 1997). Hetherington (2005) added that trust is especially important for generating public support for programs that entail some perceived risk or sacrifice. Political trust is the trust that people place in political institutions or their leaders. It links ordinary citizens to the political system that is intended to represent them (Mishler & Rose, 2005).

		Emotionality		
		High	Low	Virtually absent
Rationality	High	Ideological trust	Cognitive trust	Rational prediction
	Low	Emotional trust	Mundane, routine trust	Probable anticipation
	Virtually absent	Fate	Fate	Uncertainty, panic

Fig.1 Trust process by Lewis and Weigert (1985)

#### *Understanding Trust in Government*

As stated by Hardin (1999), interpersonal trust is a distinct phenomenon from government trust. There are two methods for establishing trust in an institution. One of them is to trust every individual in it, however, the roles and incentives must be designed to serve our interests. In his perspective this is most likely unachievable due to the scale (you do not know everyone and their duties), as well as the inability to have a thorough understanding of institutions and processes, given the complexity of government's activities. As a result, Hardin (1999) concludes that our expectations of government cannot justify our trust. Trust is built on the predictability of past behaviour, yet this prediction is unreliable since it is based on human behaviour. Predictability is also problematic since the government's aims are uncertain. Other scholars such as Jackson and Gau (2016), conclude that trust in government

is a component of legitimacy. Only if when things happen according to the law, we could put trust in the government however not that as a whole. Luhman (1979) added that we cannot have trust in the government, but it is possible to have confidence in them. The similarity between these scholars on defining trust in government is difficult to convey. As citizens become more educated, their expectations of government performance rise. If citizens' expectations rise faster than the actual performance of governments, trust and satisfaction could decline. These changes in expectations may explain more of the erosion of political support than real government performance (Dalton, 2005) and may surprise policymakers that are anchored in past diagnoses. As well-functioning government institutions matter for business investment decisions, trust in them is a necessary ingredient to spur economic growth (Algan & Cuha, 2013). Katzenstein (2000) uses the word confidence in defining what political trust means: political trust is the public's confidence in representative democratic institutions, including political parties, parliament, bureaucracies, the legal system, the police, and the armed forces. Citrin and Muste (2009) add to the definition of the citizenry's expectations of government: Political trust indicates confidence that authorities will observe the rules of the game and serve the general interest. Several surveys conducted in almost all of the European countries have shown that a large proportion of citizens, in some cases the majority, have "none" or "little" confidence in the main institutions of the political regime: parties, government, parliament, high-level administration, courts, army, and police, as well as in their leaders (Dogan, 2005). Alesina and Wacziarg (2012) mentioned that the decline in confidence is the result of the government's inability to deliver outcomes of the same quality as in the past.

#### *Covid-19 Management*

Covid-19 refers to a novel pneumonia disease originating in Wuhan, China (World Health Organization, 2020). The whole country is affected by this virus including Malaysia. As a way to combat the virus outbreak, Malaysia applied a few levels of movement control order. The first one is Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO)-Strict order in certain places where a high number of cases from clusters were discovered. Secondly is Conditional MCO - having more flexible restrictions aimed at safely reopening the economy. The Recovery MCO - permits interstate travel and the easing of the majority of restrictions. One of the earliest actions was providing necessary equipment to the hospital, the instalment of thermal imaging cameras in the arrival halls in the airport. Therefore, managing well, the Covid-19 issues is a factor in the level of confidence.

#### *Leadership*

In the literature review, servant leadership is associated with the current government where it is described as "servant leaders focus on the welfare of others" (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). As we move further into this research, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire will be used to assess the public's perception towards the government. The MLQ is developed by Bass and Avolio (1997) and has been used in multiple previous studies. As we assessed the sample of questions embody characteristics of transformational leadership styles, transactional leadership styles, and passive/avoidant leadership styles. This research proposal will focus on the transformational leadership style questionnaire. Consequently, leadership creates public perception towards a confidence level. Table 1.1 shows the items to be measured under the leadership variable.

Table 1.1

*Leadership*


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The government go beyond self-interest for the good of the group

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The government consider the moral and ethical consequences of decisions

The government talk optimistically about the future

The government reexamine critical assumption to question whether they are appropriate

This government help others to develop their strength

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**Methodology**

Research design is the plan for a study that provides the specification of a procedure to be followed by the researchers to accomplish the research objectives for their studies (Kumar et al., 2013). A research design provides a framework to use to identify variables which is the relationship between public perceptions and the current ruling government. To achieve the study's objective, a cross-sectional design using a quantitative method will be used in this study. A quantitative research method will be used in this study which relies on the primary data from a survey involving the respondents in Kuching.

*PHASE 1: Sampling Technique*

The sampling technique in this study will be based on the convenience sampling technique. Convenience sampling is defined as a method where researchers collect market research data from a conveniently available pool of respondents. The main reason for choosing this type of sampling method is because of the current pandemic situation which limits us to meet with people. Other than that, is because of the large population and large sample size that will be collected. Therefore, it is important to collect the data as soon as possible to finish this research within the timeline. Further, the targeted population for this study are the residents of Kuching district.

*PHASE 2: Data Collection*

The data from this study will be collected through the online distribution. Where the prepared questionnaire was distributed online through Google form. We chose this method since this is the safest way to reach the targeted respondents during the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only that, but it is also the most economical way to make the questionnaire since it is free and has no monetary cost involved. By looking at the required number of samples, it is faster to reach the targeted respondent compared to making a distribution by hand. The questionnaire was distributed via communication Mobile Applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram. A direct link will be provided in the message so that the respondents can access the questionnaire instantly. In addition, to speed up the process of gathering data, the questionnaire was shared over social media, which is Facebook. This is done by embedding the questionnaire link directly into the post. We will encourage mutual friends who stay within the Kuching district on Facebook to share the post publicly or share via Facebook Messenger. The respondent will be asked to fully complete all sets of questionnaires. The questionnaire is prepared in two languages which are English and Bahasa Melayu. Upon the link's opening, the respondent will be asked to choose either to go with the English or Bahasa Melayu questionnaire.

*PHASE 3: Data Analysis*

There are three data analysis objectives according to (Sekaran, 2009). First is getting a feel for the data, a visual summary which will be obtained by checking the central tendency and

the dispersion of variables. The second objective is testing the goodness of data which can be achieved by submitting the data for factor analysis, obtaining Cronbach's alpha or the split-half reliability of the measures and many others. The last one is hypothesis testing. This can be accomplished by choosing the necessary menu of the software programs to test each of the hypotheses using the relevant statistical test. The data for this study will be analysed using Statistical Software for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23. The data analyses that will be used are Descriptive Statistics, Mean and Pearson Correlation.

*PHASE 4: Descriptive Analysis*

Descriptive statistics are used to summarize data in an organized manner by describing the relationship between variables. Which is the interval, nominal, ordinary and ratio as well as a measure of frequency, dispersion and position in a sample or population. In this research, we will be mainly using mean and Pearson Correlation. The means will be collected to find research objectives 1 and 2. Meanwhile, for research objective 3 will be using Pearson correlation to find the relationship between public perception and confidence level.

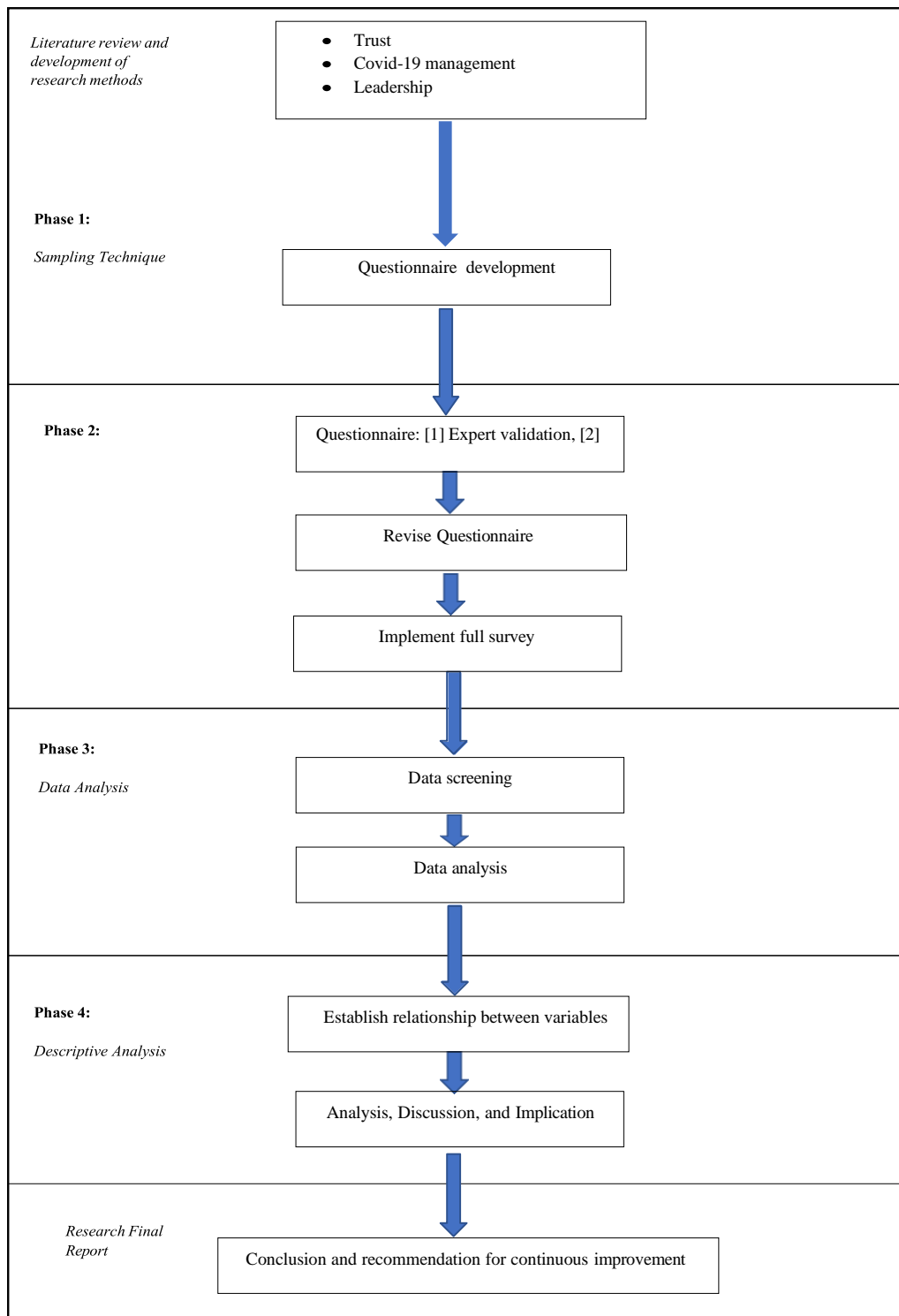


Figure 3: Flowchart of research plan

### Conclusions

This research aims to investigate the public's perception towards the non-democratically elected government of the ruling party PN (Perikatan Nasional) in Kuching City, Sarawak. The study focuses on three chosen independent variables (trust, COVID-19 management, and leadership) to gauge the public's confidence in the government's performance and policies. While the selection of three variables is practical, the inclusion of additional independent



variables could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the public's perception. The study will contribute to the body of knowledge related to the public's perception of non-democratically elected governments, particularly focusing on the specific context of Kuching City in East Malaysia. It is in Sarawak, Malaysia, serves as the specific context for this research. This region presents a unique case study due to its historical and cultural background and its role in the larger political landscape of the country. Understanding how the people of Kuching perceive the non-democratically elected government is essential to comprehend the broader implications and sentiments across East Malaysia. The findings are expected to inform policymakers on improving the current government system and enhancing public trust in the government. The study will be grounded in theories related to political science, governance, and public perception. It will draw on concepts like legitimacy, trust, and public opinion to understand how the absence of democratic processes influences the public's perception of the government. The main contributions of the research are as follows:

#### Main Contributions of the Research

a) *Understanding Public Perception*: By analyzing the public's perception of PN, this research will shed light on the factors influencing public trust and confidence in a government that did not undergo democratic processes. The findings will provide valuable insights into the dynamics of governance and public opinion, especially in regions with unique political contexts.

b) *Policymaking and Governance*: Policymakers play a critical role in shaping the government's response to public concerns. This study's outcomes will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the current government system. The research will inform policy development to address the specific needs and demands of the community, leading to more effective governance.

c) *Community Benefit*: The study's insights will directly benefit the community in Kuching City and beyond. The findings will enable citizens to evaluate the government's performance objectively and serve as a guide in making informed decisions during future elections. Empowered with knowledge, the public can actively participate in the democratic process and demand accountability from their representatives.

In conclusion, this research seeks to explore the public's perception of the non-democratically elected government of PN in Kuching City, Sarawak. The study's theoretical and contextual perspectives will provide a robust framework for understanding the dynamics of public perception in unique political contexts. The research's contributions will extend to policymaking and governance, benefiting the community and serving as a valuable source of information for future government improvements.

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