PROJEK SAMA

Stability & Accountability
for Malaysia

Public Opinion Survey on

Ethnic Relations in West Malaysia

2024 Q4

Prof. Wong Chin Huat

Projek SAMA is an initiative to advocate for institutional reforms to advance political stability and accountability at a time our nation steers through democratization into uncharted waters of hung parliaments and coalition governments

Executive Summary

Have Malaysia's ethnic relations deteriorated in recent years after democratisation when various socio-political forces were unleashed as the society opened up? While anecdotal evidence is plenty and related questions have been posed in some surveys from time to time, there has yet to be a regular opinion poll running specifically and systematically on this matter.

Concerned with how deteriorating ethnic relations and non-stop episodes of culture war both undermine political stability and accountability, and derail the agenda of institutional reform, Project Stability and Accountability for Malaysia (Projek SAMA) commissioned pollster Invoke to conduct its first quarterly survey on ethnic relations in West Malaysia, where the challenges are the greatest.

The survey took place on 1-28 October 2024, using Random Digit Dialing (RDD) and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Robocalls. It obtained complete responses from a total of 611 adults of 18 years old or above: 306 Malays (margin of error, MOE, at 95% confidence interval, 5.24%), 200 Chinese (MOE, 5.94%) and 105 Indians (MOE, 5.19%). The sampling method was stratified random sampling on ethnicity and gender.

A total of 10 questions were asked and valid data was successfully collected for eight of them. The survey findings reveal that West Malaysians generally have much more in common than in differences. Here are four takeaways while we welcome researchers to utilise the raw data deposited at https://projeksama.org/ for deeper and more nuanced analyses.

1. Majority wanted the government to act against violence, not a blanket ban of 3R discussions

On the matters of 3R (race, religion, royalty) issues, as many as 78% of the Malay respondents wanted the Government to "take stern actions against use, threat or instigation of violence, whether or not the issue is related to 3R". In contrast, 67% of the Malay respondents wanted the government to "prohibit hurtful or harmful comments in 3R discussions" while only 41% of the Malay respondents want the government "to prohibit any discussion related to 3R even if the discussion is civil and rational."

There was a similar but lower pattern of support on these three issues amongst the Indian respondents (actions against violence - 63%; prohibition of hate speech in 3R discussions - 56%; and prohibition of all 3R discussions, 34%) and the Chinese respondents (55%, 42% and 26%).

A weighted sample based on West Malaysia's ethnic composition shows that 71% expressed support for stern actions against violence, 60% for prohibition of hate speech in 3R discussions and only 37% for a blanket ban on 3R discussions.

2. Majority wanted respect for Islam and respect for multiculturalism to go hand-in-hand

A significant cross-ethnic consensus, 75% of both the Malay and Chinese respondents and 81% of the Indian respondents thought that "respect for Islam and respect for multiculturalism must go hand-in-hand". Only 22% of the Malay respondents wanted "respect for Islam must take precedence over respect for multiculturalism" while 21% of the Chinese respondents and 16% of the Indian respondents wanted the exact opposite.

A weighted sample based on West Malaysia's ethnic composition shows that 76% wanted both respect for Islam and respect for multiculturalism to go hand-in-hand while 16% wanted respect for Islam to take precedence and the remaining 8% wanted instead to prioritise respect for multiculturalism.

3. Majority did not see the government treating everyone fairly; Malays and Chinese assigned unfairness more to class differences. Indians assigned unfairness more to ethnic differences

Less than half of the respondents (42% of Malays, 45% of Chinese and 31% of Indians) felt that "The Government and its agencies treat everyone fairly." Interestingly, of those who felt that they have been *short-changed*, twice more Malays saw that from a class lens, ie, "the Government and its agencies normally side the rich and the powerful over ordinary people like me" (41%) than those who saw it from a communal lens, "the Government and its agencies normally side the other race over our race" (17%). Likewise but with a small gap, more Chinese saw the government's unfairness from a class lens (32%) than from a communal lens (23%).

However, for the Indians respondents, more felt that the government and its agencies normally "side the other race over our race" (37%) over those who felt class-based discrimination and who felt that the government had been fair (both 31%).

A weighted sample based on West Malaysia's ethnic composition shows that only 42% felt that the Government and its agencies treated people fairly while 38% felt unfairness in favour of the rich and the powerful and the remaining 20% felt unfairness in favour of the other race.

4. Majority still believed in a common destiny for humanity but some felt the global order is hostile to Muslims or non-Whites

A clear majority of respondents across ethnic groups (67% Chinese, 65% Indians and 54% Malays) found themselves closest to the universalist position that "Humans have a common destiny. We must help each other and cooperate to preserve the planet." However, close to half of the Malay respondents saw primarily global injustice, with 33% of them feeling that "Muslims in the world are being threatened by infidels and … must unite to dominate the infidels" and a smaller 12% seeing non-White countries like China and India being bullied by the West. Comparably, 32% of the Chinese respondents and 30% of the Indians find themselves closest to the Non-white anti-colonialist position.

A weighted sample based on West Malaysia's ethnic composition shows that 58% believed in a common destiny for humans while 24% saw Muslims being threatened by infidels and the remaining 18% felt that the West was bullying non-white countries like China and India.

Full Report

The report analyses eight questions in six parts, covering (a) cross-ethnic social network; (b) 3R: free speech, hate speech and violence; (c) global politics; (d) Islam and multiculturalism; (e) government fairness; and (f) restrictions on personal behaviors.

Methodology

The survey was undertaken by established pollster, Invoke, covering 611 Malaysian adults aged 18 residing in West Malaysia (306 Malays, 200 Chinese and 105 Indians) during 1-28 October 2024. This yielded the respective margins of error at 95% confidence interval: Malays – 5.24%, Chinese – 5.94%, and Indians – 5.19%.

In simple English, for example, if 60% of the Malay respondents answered "yes" on a particular question, there is a 95% chance that between 54.76% and 65.24% [60% +/- 5.24%] of the West Malaysian Malay population answered "yes". The smaller the margin error, the more accurate the estimate, but this requires the sample size to be larger, incurring a higher cost.

The sampling method was "stratified random sampling" on two criteria: ethnicity and gender. The survey questions were available in three languages: Malay, English and Chinese.

The survey method used was a combination of Random Digit Dialing (RDD) and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Robocalls, which maximizes data accuracy by reducing sampling and desirability bias, ensuring that the survey responses reflect diverse and representative public opinion.

- Random Digit Dialing (RDD): INVOKE generates random phone numbers within Malaysia's telephone prefixes to reach a potential sample size of 21 million adults. By generating numbers randomly, RDD helps mitigate sampling bias and ensures all potential respondents have an equal chance of being contacted.

- Interactive Voice Response (IVR): Pre-recorded calls with survey questions allowed respondents to provide answers using their phone's keypad, enabling them to select specific answers or options. The flexibility within the IVR system would allow, if needed, the option to present different recording languages, enhancing accessibility for diverse respondent groups. The IVR method standardizes responses and reduces desirability bias, as respondents interact solely with an automated system. Additionally, IVR provides scalability, enabling us to reach a large number of respondents efficiently without requiring participation incentives.

The call pick-up and completion rates were however a challenge with the initial sampling frame of 21 million. The initial five days (1-5 October 2024) registered a 2% call pick-up rate and a 5% completion rate. As this was not budgetary viable, it caused a switch of sampling frame for the remaining operation (8-28 October 2024). A smaller sampling frame was drawn up, consisting of individuals who had completed an Invoke survey within the past two months, from geographical areas with the highest historical response rates. This remarkably improved the call pick-up rate to 5% and the completion rate to 20%.

We recognise that the smaller sampling frame in the second stage, inevitable under the budget constraint, might introduce some regional nuance and selection bias to the data. On one hand, it over-represented respondents from areas with high response rates vis-a-vis respondents from other areas. For example, response rates are typically higher in states like Kelantan, where residents may have greater availability to participate in surveys due to flexible work schedules or self-employment, allowing them to respond more readily during the day.

This can lead to a larger share of responses reflecting the perspectives common in these regions, which may differ from those in areas with lower response rates. On the other hand, only recent participants were called but this selection bias is somewhat inherent in phone surveys, as indeed a small portion of phone users would accept and complete a survey. Notwithstanding these limitations, the representativeness in ethnicity and gender was adhered to. The alternative of simplifying the questionnaire to improve completion rate was also considered and decided against in favour of the more targeted sampling frame.

Projek SAMA appreciates the best efforts by Invoke to produce a representative sample within the consideration for cost-efficiency. The survey contained 10 questions and answers for eight questions were complete for analysis. As a small budget limited the size of ethnic sub-samples, the survey had to focus on West Malaysia and the Malay/non-Malay divide, where ethnic relations are most fraught. In future, we hope we can get a bigger budget to cover both East and West Malaysia and study more nuances of ethnic relations.

Part A. Cross Ethnic Interaction

As the Malay proverb goes, "tak kenal maka tak cinta" (you can't love somebody without knowing him/her), closer interethnic interaction is generally expected to improve inter-ethnic relations, although the possibility of closer contacts may bring about conflicts cannot be dismissed.

In Q3, respondents were asked, "out of the nine people I interact with most frequently each day, how many are from the other ethno-religious category?" (For Malay respondents, Chinese/Indians/Non-Muslims. For Chinese and Indians respondents, Malays/Muslims).

Methodological note: To increase 'complete response rate' by asking less complicated questions, this question focused on the interaction across the two most significant ethno-religious categories, the Malays-Muslims and the non-Malays/Muslims. Hence, the findings excluded cross-ethnic interaction between Chinese and Indians, and understated the cross-ethnic networks that Chinese and Indians had.
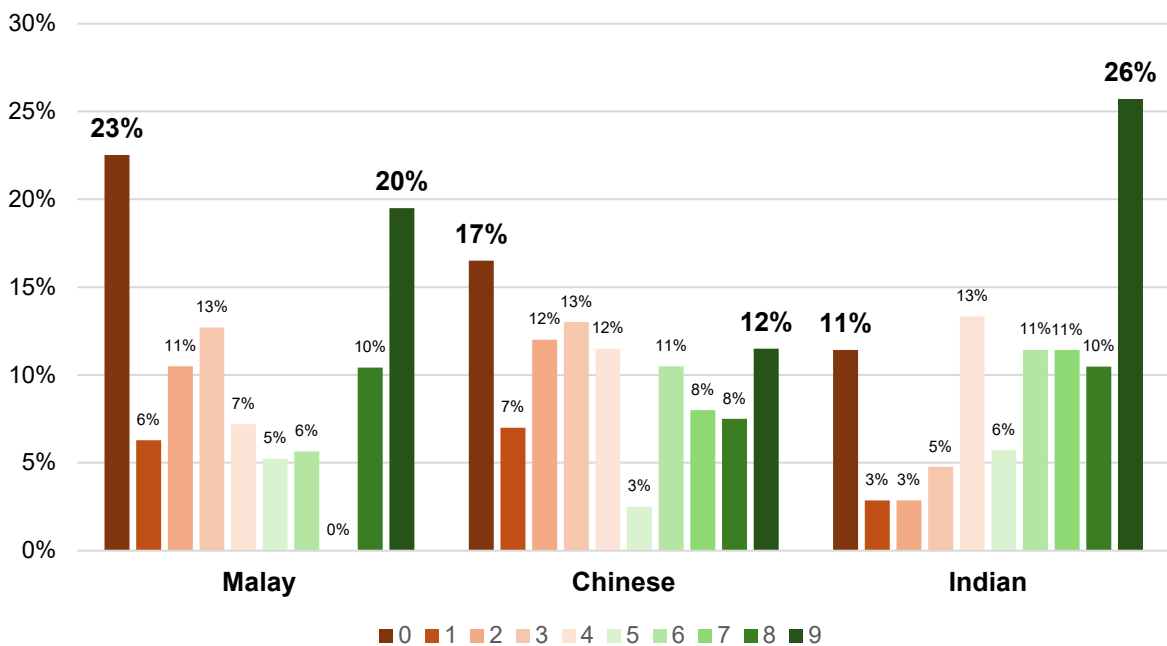
▶ *Graph 1: For 65% of Indian respondents, 41% of Malays and 40% of Chinese, more than half of the nine people they had most daily interactions with were from the opposite ethno-religious category.*

The survey results show a widespread across the spectrum. On one end, some respondents (26% Indians, 20% Malays and 12% Chinese) had all of the top nine interactors from the opposite ethno-religious category. On the other end, some other respondents (23% Malays, 17% Chinese and 11% Indians) had completely no one out of the top nine interactors from the other side of the main divide. They might be living or working in a monoethnic locality or environment.

Across ethnic groups, a vast majority of the respondents (77% Malays, 83% Chinese and 89% Indians) had at least one cross-ethnic top interactor. Further, a significant portion of them even had most of their top daily interactors (five or more out of nine) across the main ethnic divide. They made up an overwhelming majority amongst Indians (65% out of 89%), a bare majority amongst Malays (41% out of 77%) and a strong minority amongst the Chinese (40% out of 83%).

All in all, Indian respondents had more cross-ethnic interactors than their Malay and Chinese counterparts did, perhaps because the latter two communities have more ethnic enclaves with their larger demographic size and greater concentration.

Part B. 3R - Free Speech, Hate Speech and Violence

The Madani Government has prohibited discussions concerning "race, religion, and royalty" (3R). The logic is that 3R discussions would tear apart our social fabrics. The question needs to be unpacked is: Is the toxic division caused by the nature of the 3R issues, thus necessitating a blanket ban? Or is it caused by the manner in which the 3R issues are debated (hate speech)? Or, is the real harm caused by violence provoked or incited, even if the issues are not 3R? Greater clarity on this matter would assist better public policies. Finally, what is the public's opinion in West Malaysia?
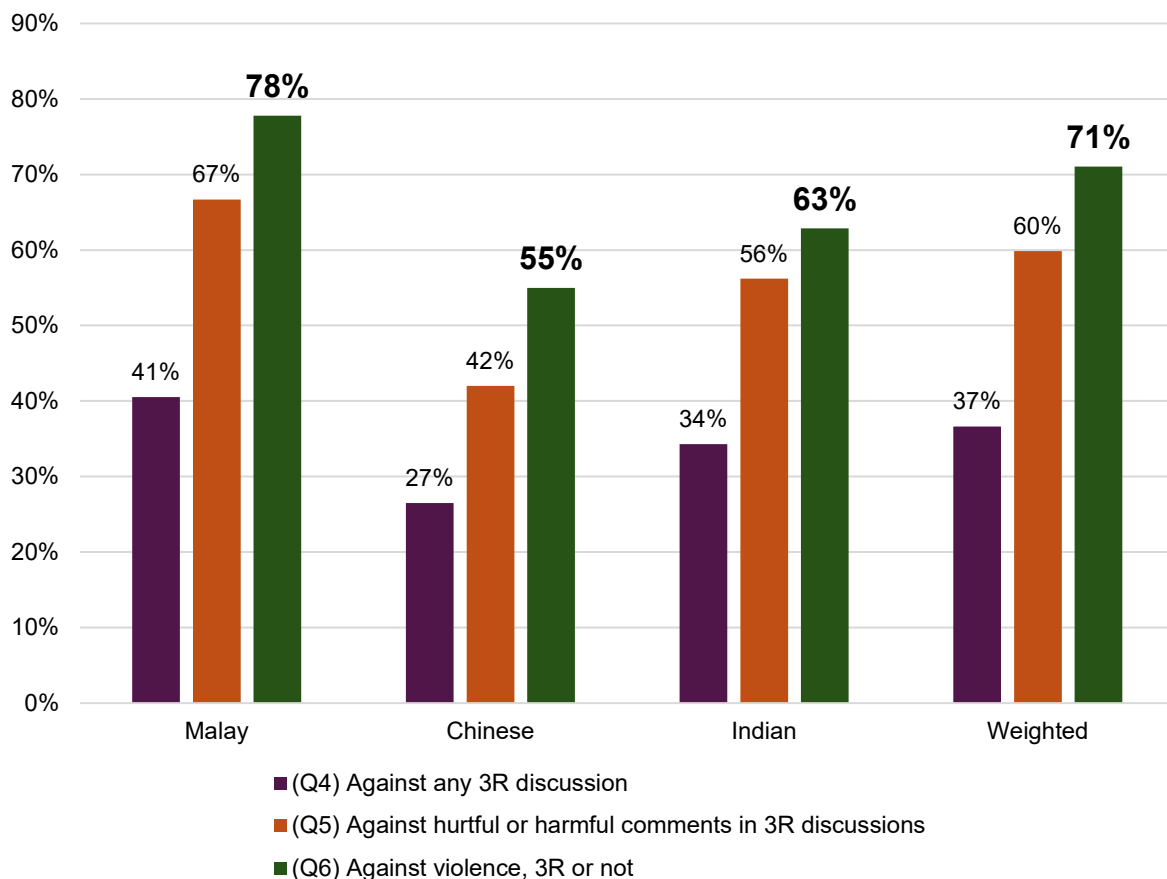
Respondents are questioned regarding their stance whether they think that

(a) "The Government should prohibit any discussion related to race, religion and royalty (3R) even if the discussion is civil and rational." (Q4)

(b) "The Government should prohibit hurtful or harmful comments in any discussion related to race, religion and royalty (3R) (Q5)"; and,

(c) "The Government should take stern action against the use, threat or instigation of violence, whether or not the issue is related to race, religion and royalty (3R)" (Q6).

The survey finds that as many as 78% of Malay respondents "strongly agree" or "agree" with "stern action against the use, threat or instigation of violence", regardless if it is about 3R or not. (Q6) The support for "prohibition of hurtful or harmful comments" in any 3R discussion (Q5) was lower at 67%. A blanket ban on 3R discussion (Q4) was even lower at only 41%. The support for these three positions are lower for the Chinese (Q6-55% , Q5-42%, Q4-27%) and the Indians (Q6-63% , Q5-56% , Q4-34%).

A weighted sample based on West Malaysia's ethnic composition shows that 71% expressed support for stern actions against violence (Q6), 60% for prohibition of hate speech in 3R discussions (Q5) and only 37% for a blanket ban on 3R discussions (Q4).

The pattern is clear, as per Graph 2, across the three ethnic groups, the support for prohibition of violence was higher than the support for prohibition of hate speech, which was in turn higher than the support for blanket prohibition of any discussion on the 3R issues. The detailed distributions of agreement/disagreement by ethnic group for each question are shown in Graphs 3, 4 and 5.

Bar chart with categories Malay, Chinese, Indian, Weighted. Values:
- Malay: (Q4) 41%, (Q5) 67%, (Q6) 78%
- Chinese: (Q4) 27%, (Q5) 42%, (Q6) 55%
- Indian: (Q4) 34%, (Q5) 56%, (Q6) 63%
- Weighted: (Q4) 37%, (Q5) 60%, (Q6) 71%

Legend:
- (Q4) Against any 3R discussion
- (Q5) Against hurtful or harmful comments in 3R discussions
- (Q6) Against violence, 3R or not

► *Graph 2: Decreasing support across ethnic groups from actions against violence, to prohibition of hate speech in 3R discussions, to a blanket ban on 3R discussions.*
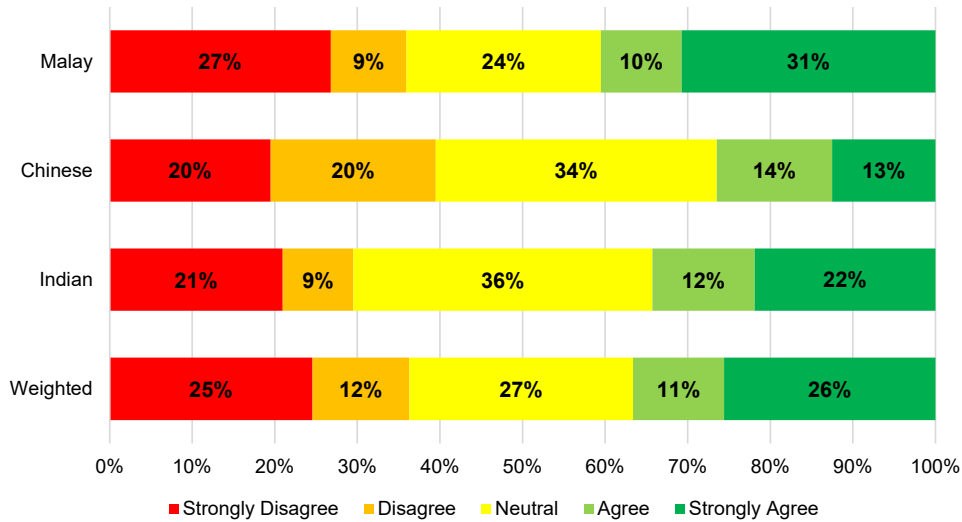
► **Graph 3:** *Across the ethnic groups, only a minority agreed that the Government should prohibit any discussion related to race, religion and royalty (3R) even if the discussion is civil and rational.*
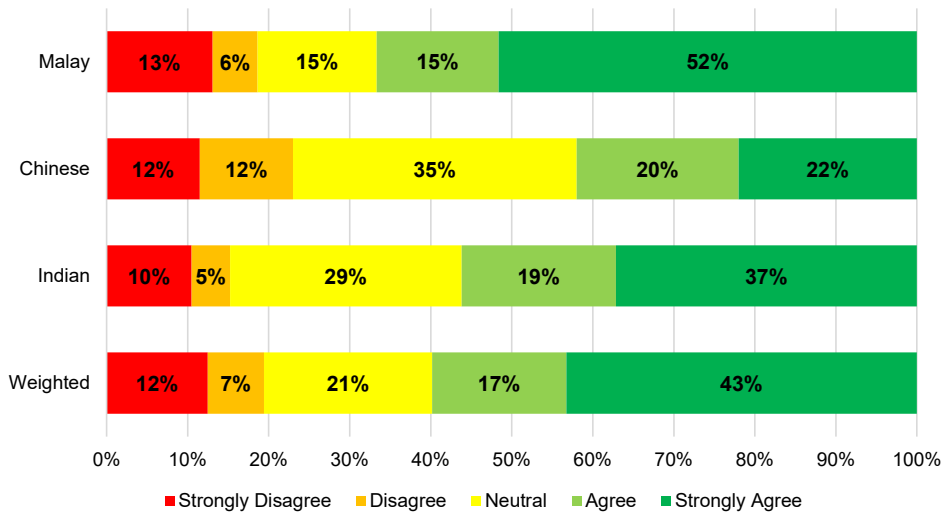
► **Graph 4:** *Overall, a majority of respondent agreed that the Government should prohibit hurtful or harmful comments in any discussion related to race, religion and royalty (3R).*
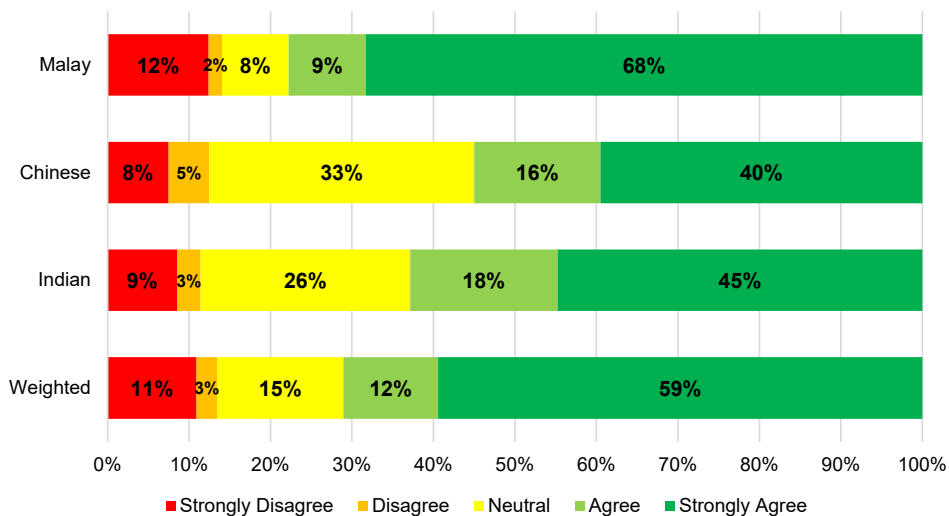
► **Graph 5:** *A majority in each ethnic group agreed that the Government should take stern action against the use, threat or instigation of violence, whether or not the issue is related to race, religion and royalty (3R).*
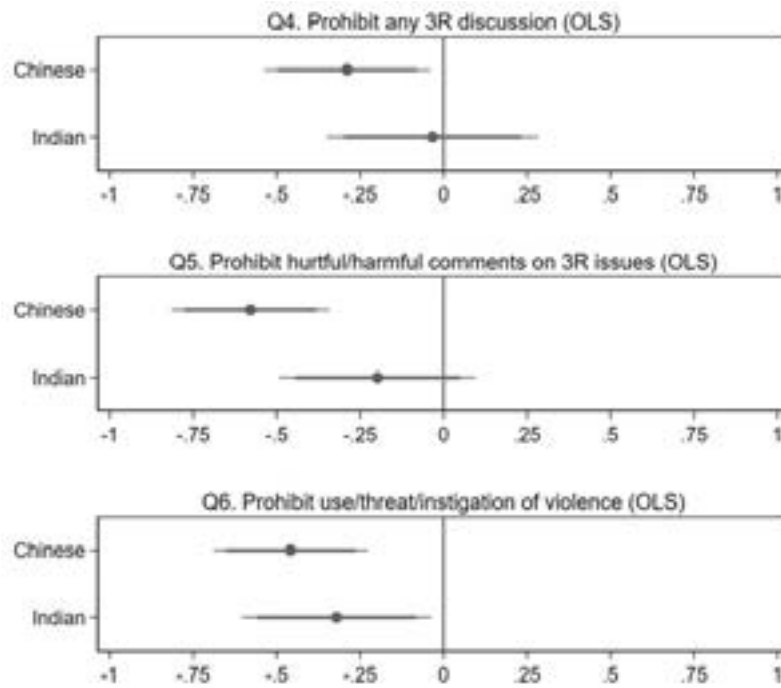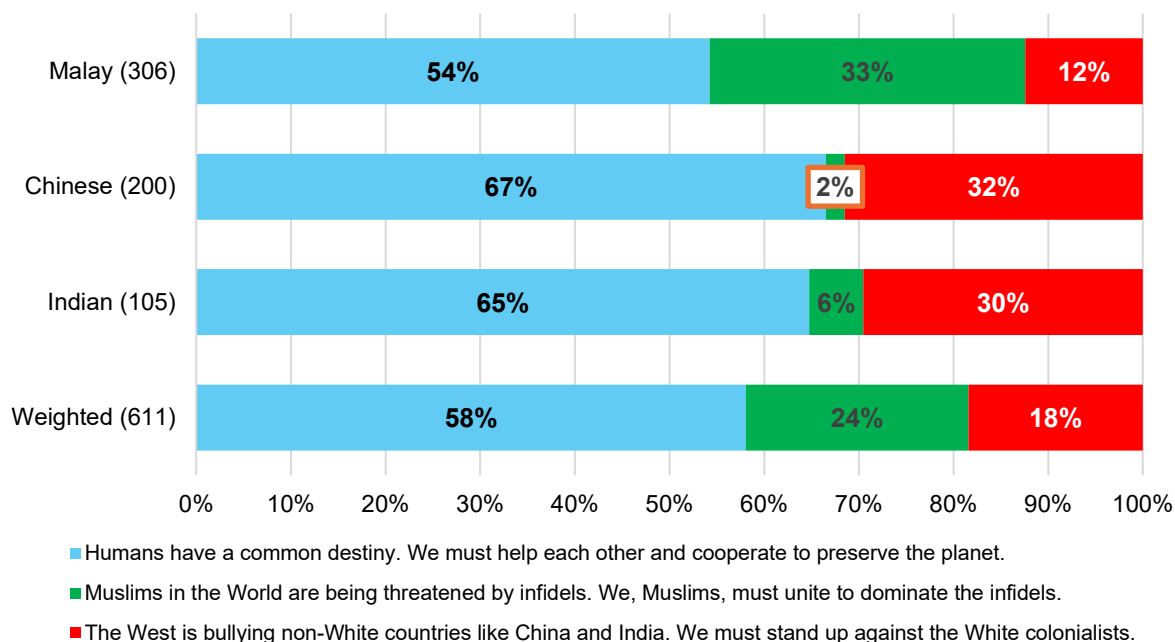
► **Graph 6:** *Statistical significance of inter-ethnic differences in Q4-Q6 under the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method*

The Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) test shows that the differences between the Malay and Chinese respondents were statistically significant for all three questions while the Malay-Indian difference was only statistically different on Q6.

Part C. Global Politics

How West Malaysians view ethnic relations may be affected by how they see the world, in particular whether those with whom they share the same faith or civilisational affinity are treated fairly. Q7 asked which statement was "closest to how they see the world", with three options:

> 1. "Humans have a common destiny. We must help each other and cooperate to preserve the planet." (universal humanist)

> 2. "Muslims in the World are being threatened by infidels. We, Muslims, must unite to dominate the infidels." (Muslim-nationalist)

> 3. "The West is bullying non-White countries like China and India. We must stand up against the White colonialists." (Non-white anti-colonialist)

Malay (306): 54% / 33% / 12%
Chinese (200): 67% / 2% / 32%
Indian (105): 65% / 6% / 30%
Weighted (611): 58% / 24% / 18%

■ Humans have a common destiny. We must help each other and cooperate to preserve the planet.
■ Muslims in the World are being threatened by infidels. We, Muslims, must unite to dominate the infidels.
■ The West is bullying non-White countries like China and India. We must stand up against the White colonialists.

► *Graph 7: A majority of respondents across ethnic groups believe that humans had a common destiny and everyone should cooperate together to preserve the planet.*

A clear majority of respondents across ethnic groups (67% Chinese, 65% Indians and 54% Malays) found themselves closest to the universalist position of a common human destiny and the need for global co-operation to protect the planet. However, close to half of the Malay respondents saw primarily global injustice, with 33% of them feeling that "Muslims in the world are being threatened by infidels and … must unite to dominate the infidels" and a smaller 12% seeing non-White countries like China and India being bullied by the West. Comparably, 32% of the Chinese respondents and 30% of the Indians found themselves closest to the Non-white anti-colonialist position.
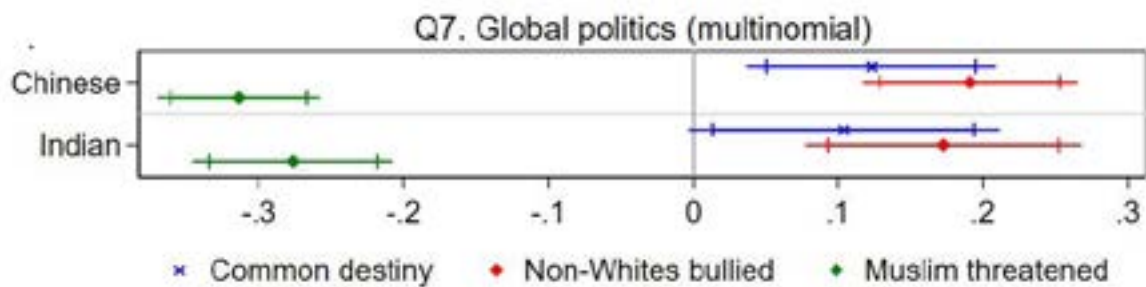
► *Graph 8: Statistical significance of inter-ethnic differences in Q7 using the Multinomial Test*

Employing a multinomial test, the Malay and Chinese respondents had a statistically significant difference on seeing a common destiny for humanity. Unsurprisingly, the differences between Malays and non-Malays on seeing Muslims globally threatened and on seeing non-white nations like China and India as bullied by the West were statistically significant.

A weighted sample based on West Malaysia's ethnic composition shows that 58% believed in a common destiny for humans while 24% saw Muslims being threatened by infidels and the remaining 18% felt the West was bullying non-white countries like China and India.

Part D. Islam and Multiculturalism

Often in social media, respect for Islam and respect for multiculturalism are posited as somewhat incompatible, that some trade-off must be made at some points, that either respect for Islam or respect for multiculturalism should take precedence. Under such lopsided framings, Muslims and the religious minorities are then fed with respective messages that their communities have been shortchanged.

Asked "which of these statements is closest to how you think Malaysia should be?", the findings for Q8 shows that three quarters or more of the respondents across ethnic groups believed that "respect for Islam and respect for multiculturalism must go hand in hand", with the strongest call amongst Indian respondents (81%). Only a tiny minority in each ethnic category wanted the opposite favouring their community – 22% of Malay respondents thought that "respect for Islam must take precedence over respect for multiculturalism" while 21% of Chinese and 16% of Indians thought that it should be the exact opposite.

Malay (306): 75% / 22% / 3%
Chinese (200): 76% / 4% / 21%
Indian (105): 81% / 3% / 16%
Weighted (611): 76% / 16% / 8%

■ Respect for Islam and respect for multiculturalism must go hand in hand.
■ Respect for Islam must take precedence over respect for multiculturalism.
■ Respect for multiculturalism must take precedence over respect for Islam.
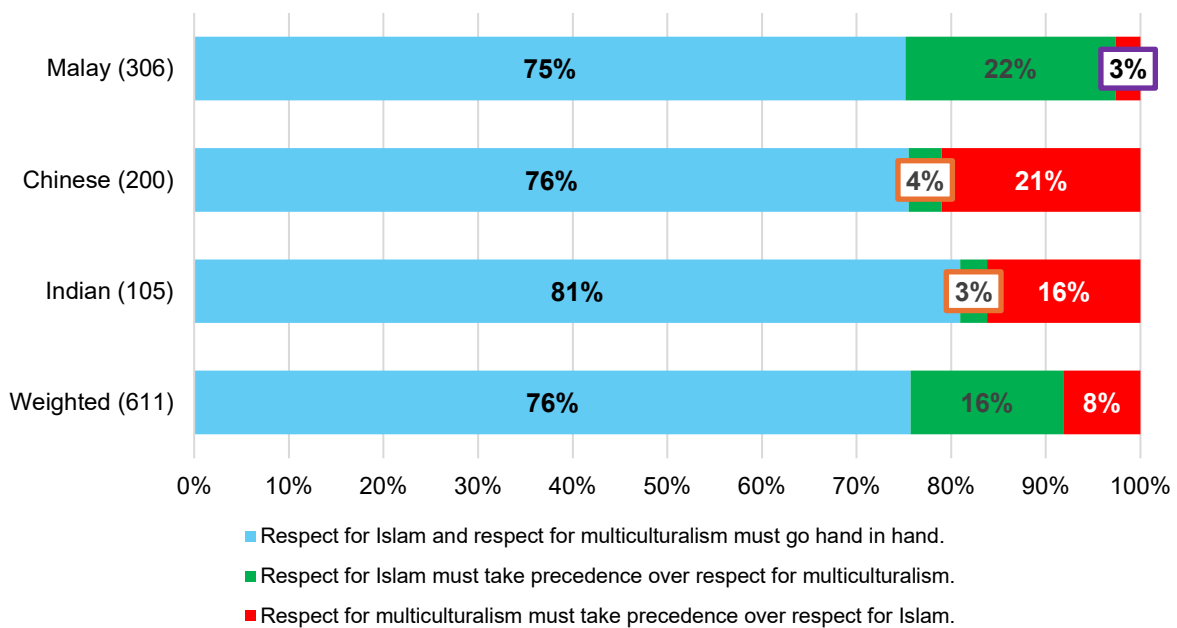
► *Graph 9: A vast majority of respondents across ethnic groups want respect for Islam and respect for multiculturalism to go hand in hand*

Q8. Respect for Islam and Multiculturalism (multinomial)

× Both important　◆ Multiculturalism　✦ Islam
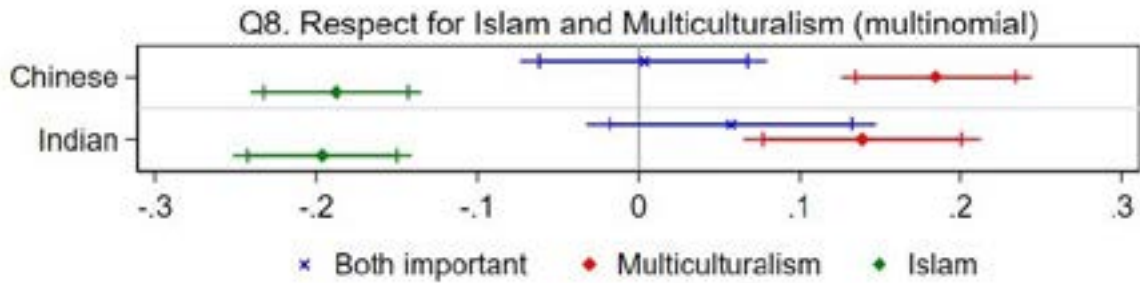
► **Graph 10:** *Statistical significance of inter-ethnic differences in Q8 using the Multinomial Test*

Unsurprisingly, the Malays and non-Malays only demonstrated statistically significant differences on the positions that privilege respect for Islam or respect for multiculturalism.

A weighted sample based on West Malaysia's ethnic composition shows that 76% wanted both respect for Islam and respect for multiculturalism to go hand-in-hand while 16% wanted respect for Islam to take precedence and the remaining 8% wanted instead to prioritise respect for multiculturalism.

Part E. Government's Fairness

Across nations, doubts on government impartiality or fairness do not just breed resentment against the government, but often sour ethnic relations in multiethnic society. However, unfairness on the part of the government could be perceived from a communal lens ("the other race over our race") or a broadly class lens ("the rich and the powerful over ordinary people like me"). Even though these two may overlap, namely the privileged group are elites from the other ethnic group, how the disgruntled citizens primarily see such unfairness - from a communal or class lens - matters. In fact, many hate speech messages on social media in Malaysia aim to invoke the communal lens on perceived government partiality.

When asked "which of these statements is closest to your experience?", only a minority of the respondents (46% Chinese, 42% Malay, and 31% Indian) chose that "the Government and its agencies treat everyone fairly." Of those who saw unfairness in government behaviors, more than twice of the Malay respondents (41%) saw it from the class lens that "the Government and its agencies normally side the rich and the powerful over ordinary people like me." than those who saw it from the communal lens (17%) that "the Government and its agencies normally side the other race over our race." A similar pattern appeared amongst the Chinese respondents, but the gap between the class lens (32%) and the communal lens (23%) was much smaller.

Notably, the largest segment amongst the Indian respondents (37%) experienced government unfairness from the communal lens while the remaining were equally split at 31% between those who experienced class-based unfairness and those who experienced fairness in their dealing with the government and its agencies.

- The Government and its agencies treat everyone fairly.
- The Government and its agencies normally side the other race over our race.
- The Government and its agencies normally side the rich and the powerful over ordinary people like me.
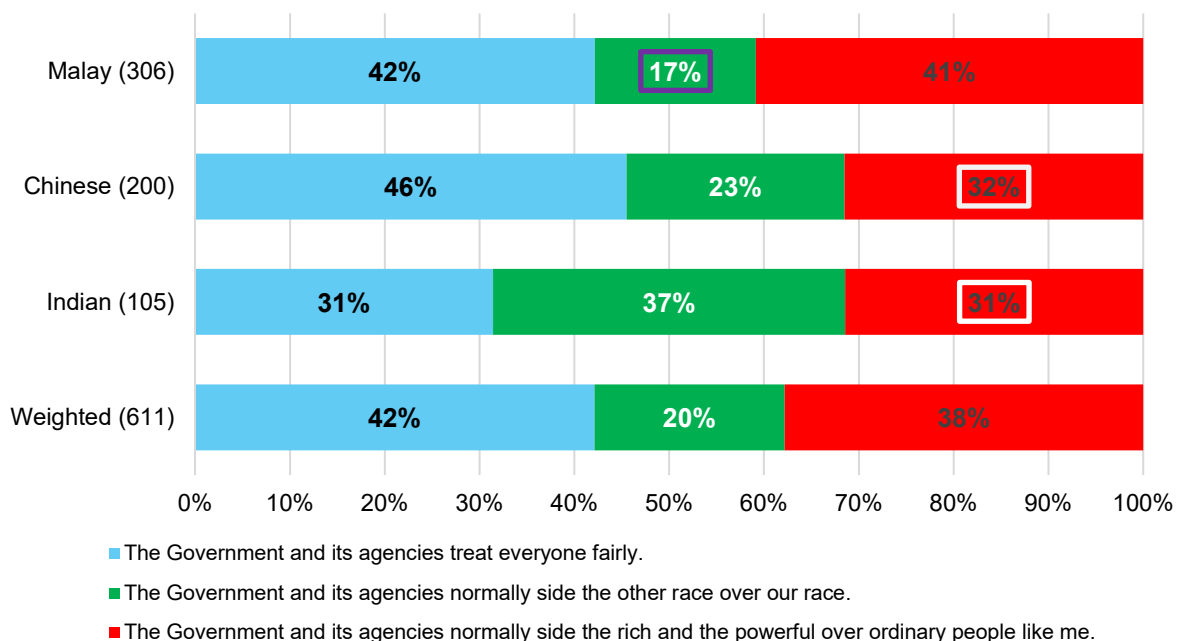
► *Graph 11: A vast majority of respondents across ethnic groups want respect for Islam and respect for multiculturalism to go hand in hand*

Q8. Respect for Islam and Multiculturalism (multinomial)
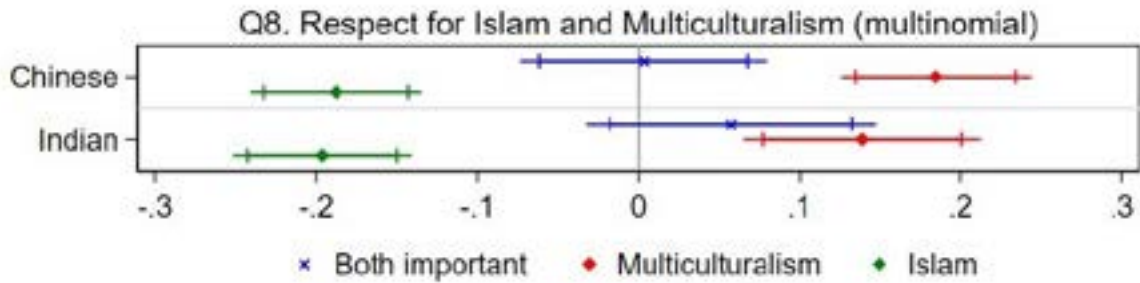
► **Graph 12:** *Statistical significance of inter-ethnic differences in Q9 using the Multinomial Test*

The statistically significant interethnic differences appeared only between the Malays and Chinese on the government's unfairness from a class lens (privileging the rich and the powerful) and the Malays and Indians on the government's unfairness from a communal lens (privileging the other race).

A weighted sample based on West Malaysia's ethnic composition shows that only 42% felt that the Government and its agencies treated people fairly while 38% felt unfairness in favour of the rich and the powerful and the remaining 20% felt unfairness in favour of the other race.

Part F. Restriction on Personal Behaviours

Restrictions on personal behaviours in Malaysia - almost always associated with religion and culture - trigger very different responses from the Malays and the non-Malays. Such differences enable political parties and politicians to turn these restrictions into useful tools to rally their communal bases, politically splitting voters over other issues that may affect their lives more. However, does a tougher position always work in getting more votes? Is the support for or opposition to restrictions similar across different subject matters of restrictions?
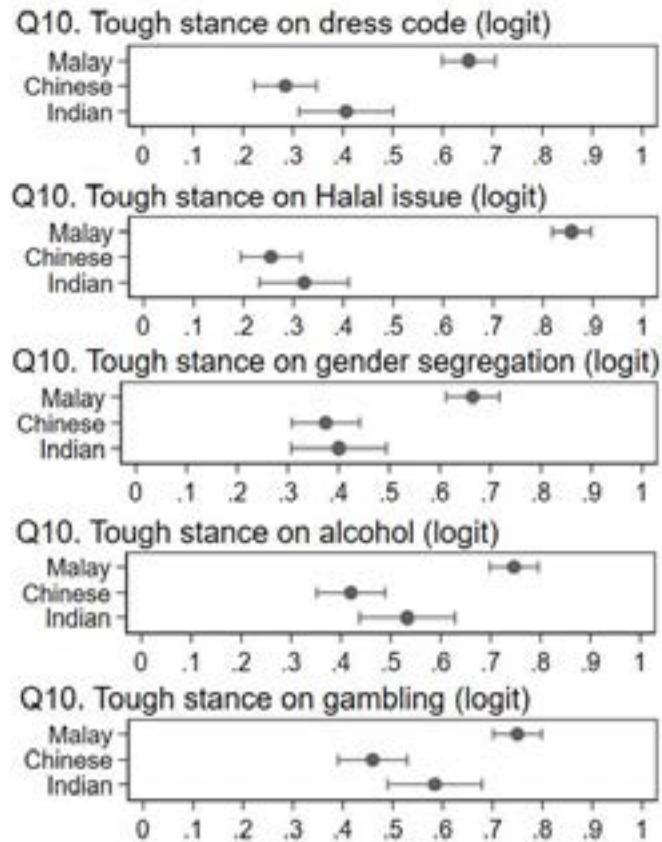
In Q10, each respondent was asked "please indicate whether you are 'more likely' or 'less likely' to support a party if it proposes a 'tougher stance' on the issue", for five issues: "dress code", "halal food issue", "gender segregation", "alcohol" and "gambling".

Methodological note: We strongly advise caution in interpreting the findings in Q10. First, respondents' understanding and stand of the issue may vary in their lived experience, as no clarification or deliberation was allowed in robocalls, and hence should not be viewed as absolutely opposed to one another. For example, for Malay respondents, "halal food issue" may be about the availability of halal assurance for Malay respondents but for Chinese and Indian respondents, it may be about the restrictions on the availability of pork and alcohol which impacted the non-Malays, or the obstruction to multiethnic dining experience. To interpret the "why" in the findings or to triangulate these findings, focus group discussions may be necessary.

As the respondents were not given an option of "indifference" in the design, the findings might have also inflated the support or opposition for the restrictions.

Amongst the Malay respondents, greater likelihood of party support for a tougher stance was obviously lower on "dress code" (65%) and "gender segregation" (66%) as compared to "halal food issue" (86%), "alcohol" and "gambling" (both 75%). On the other hand, amongst the Chinese respondents, lesser likelihood of party support for a tougher stance was obviously higher on "halal issue" (-75%) and "dress code" (-72%) than "gender segregation" (-63%), "alcohol" (-58%) and "gambling" (-54%).

The most interesting findings however came from the Indian respondents. A majority of them indicated greater likelihood to support a party for a tougher stance on gambling (58%) and alcohol (53%), aligned with Malays, but lesser likelihood of party support for "halal food issue" (-68%), "gender segregation" (-60%) and "dress code" (-59%), akin to Chinese.

► **Graph 13:** *Statistical significance of inter-ethnic differences in Q10 using the Logistic Regression model*

Unsurprisingly, the interethnic differences between the Malays and the Chinese/Indians were statistically significant on all five subject matters of restrictions.

A weighted sample based on West Malaysia's ethnic composition shows that the political benefit for a tough stance on restriction on individual behaviours varied by issue. Dress Code was least benefitting, with only 54% more likely to support and 46% less likely to support, followed by gender segregation (57% to 43%), alcohol (65% to 35%), gambling (66% to 34%) and halal food issue (67% to 33%).

Graph legend: ■ Malay (306) ■ Chinese (200) ■ Indians (105) ■ Weighted (611)
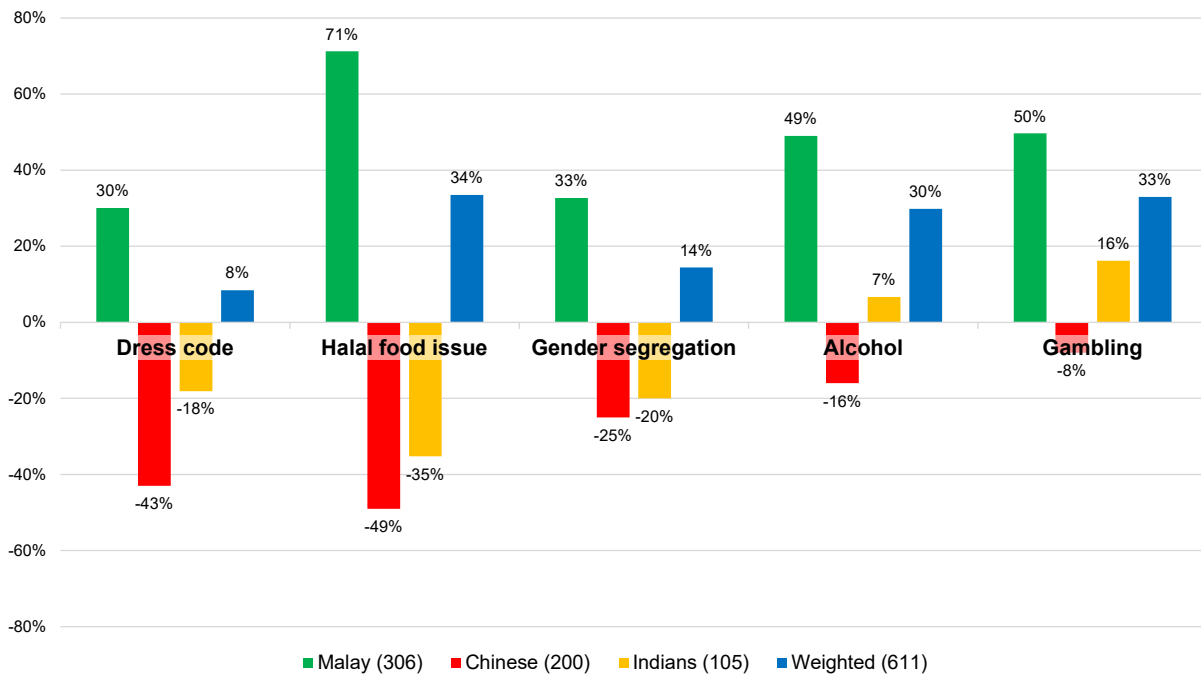
► **Graph 14:** *Cross-ethnic differences on the net increase in the likelihood of support for a party if it takes a tougher stance on these restrictions*

Graph 14 uses +/- to indicate the net change in the likelihood of support (those who indicated greater likelihood of support minus those who indicated lesser likelihood of support) for a party if it took a tougher stance on these five restrictions. It shows positive bars for Malays and negative bars for Chinese across all five subject matters, and a mix of three negative bars and two positive bars for Indians. The weighted sample based on West Malaysia's ethnic composition shows only marginal gains on dress code (+8%) and gender segregation (+14%).