

Zand's Leadership Triad: Regaining Trust in the Public Sector

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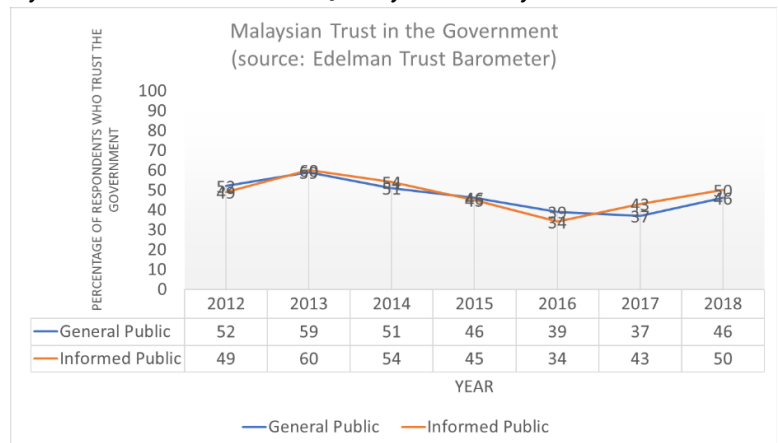
Malaysia's 14th General Election was a wake-up call. After more than 60 years, Malaysians ushered in a new era by taking to the polls.

The outcome shocked many, but there were signs that foreshadowed *Barisan Nasional's* downfall. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, a survey measuring public trust in institutions since 2000, trust in the government had been waning among the general public of Malaysia over the last 5 years. The 2018 survey did report a 9% uptick from the previous year, but 43% of respondents in that year still believed that government was the most broken among all Malaysian institutions¹². At the local level, the growing calls for transparency and accountability inferred that the majority of Malaysians had become disillusioned and opted for an alternative.

In fairness, it is hard to fault the predecessor: That they were able to govern for over 60 years proved that it was worthy of the people's trust at some point. Even in its loss, *Barisan Nasional* still managed to secure 34% of the popular vote compared to *Pakatan Harapan's* 48%³, indicating that over 4 million Malaysians still support the coalition.

However, *Barisan Nasional* was seen to be too set in its ways; it is likely that their ultimate detachment from reality and the grassroots in recent years had cost them when it came to the "father of all elections"⁴⁵.

The symbiosis in governance is well known: Governments need people to put them into a position of power, and people need governments to enact policies that benefit the people. The role of trust is fundamental in this relationship, but many recognise that it is something that you cannot buy nor gain in a short time-span. Its nature is complex, and especially in today's VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex,



¹ Toh, Billy, and Neily Syafiqah Eusoff. "Malaysians' Trust in the System Plunges to All-Time Low." South China Morning Post, South China Morning Post, 14 Mar. 2017, www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2071381/malaysians-trust-system-plunges-all-time-low-according.

² Reid, David. "US Suffers Record Drop in Public Trust as Faith in China Surges, Survey Says." CNBC, CNBC, 22 Jan. 2018, www.cnbc.com/2018/01/22/davos-2018-edelman-barometer-reveals-record-drop-in-trust-from-us-public.html.

³ Malaysiakini "GE14 Malaysiakini Live Reports and Results." Malaysiakini Live Reports, live.malaysiakini.com/ge14/en/.

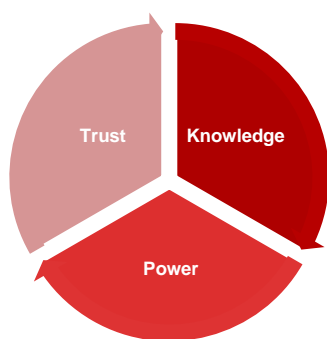
⁴ Singh, Rajvinder. "Khairy: We Should Have Told Najib about Lack of Support." TheSundaily, 15 May 2018, www.thesundaily.my/news/2018/05/15/khairy-we-should-have-told-najib-about-lack-support.

⁵ Shagar, Lokshana. "Ismail Sabri contesting Umno VP post" The Star Online, 9 June 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/06/09/ismail-sabri-contesting-umno-vp-post/>

Ambiguous) environment, its concept becomes more complicated. The question is: how do leaders gain the trust of their constituents?

In his book *The Leadership Triad*⁶, Dale E. Zand explains how leaders need to be trustworthy in return for the people's loyalty and commitment. Based on his definition, leaders with high trust must first accept that they are in a position of vulnerability to a person/party that they cannot control. They must also come to terms with the fact that they are in a position of loss should that person/party abuse their vulnerability. Thus, a leader with high trust understands that by trusting others, their potential loss in a given situation is greater than their potential benefit. As a consequence, leaders must show trust first before it is reciprocated by the followers.

Once a leader accepts that trust is dependent on vulnerability, they can show trust through information, influence and control. A high trust leader must therefore understand its three tenets. The first is that leaders with high trust share information with others in an accurate and timely manner. Secondly, a leader who shows trust accepts influence from others, be it their superiors, peers or subordinates. Finally, a leader with high trust exercises minimal control over others.



However, a lack of trust isn't the be-all and end-all. Zand posits that the triadic leader must balance knowledge, trust and power akin to three horses pulling a chariot: all forces must be coordinated and managed equally. In the big picture of a triadic leader, the role of trust is to give people the confidence that they are able to exercise their knowledge and power correctly. In the context of public sector leadership, the government should have a realistic vision of what must be done and use their power appropriately in delegating or directing others.

Howbeit broad, Zand's model of triadic leadership is one that manages to encapsulate significant components of leadership across the public-sector. Whereas the responsibility of building trust falls largely on political leaders, top officials in the public-sector could pull their weight by providing the knowledge and power that Zand hypothesized. Among this is to build a culture where knowledge can be challenged while having a strong foundation for legitimate power so that leaders are given the environment to manoeuvre in their decision-making. The vision of the triadic leader can thus be accomplished when political leaders work closely with government agencies.

Going back to the Edelman Trust Barometer, it could be that previous leaders' failure to address the three elements of trust contributed to the loss in GE14. With respect to Zand's theory, the negative trend of

⁶ Zand, Dale E. *Triadic Leadership: Knowledge, Trust, and Power*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

the Edelman Trust Barometer suggests that the public perceived leaders at the time to have withheld information from them, refused to accept influence by others and/or exercised heavy control on the public. Even internally, interviews with UMNO members reveal signs of disunity or that members were too afraid to speak up against the leadership⁷.

Only time will tell if the current government will fare better in gaining Malaysians' trust. So far, it has acknowledged the importance of information sharing by holding frequent press conferences, thereby giving some semblance of transparency. There is no shortage of hope among Malaysians as the new government finds its footing with the promise of Malaysia *Baharu*⁸, and they can surely capitalise on Malaysia's current period of transition to stress the importance of trust in nation-building. Before *Pakatan Harapan* becomes too complacent, it will be wise for them to heed the other two elements of trust, as well as to consider the role of power and knowledge in the leadership triad.

⁷ Timbuong, Jo. "Khairy: Barisan Not Well Trusted, Needs to Get Its Act Together." *Nation | The Star Online*, 7 June 2018, www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/06/07/khairy-barisan-not-well-trusted-needs-to-get-its-act-together/.

⁸ <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2018/05/10/people-hope-new-government-will-fulfill-mandate>