



Lifetime Achievement Award 2021

Prof Syed Arabi Idid

I want to thank WAPOR Asia, especially its President, Yashwant Deshmukh, and the Award Committee for this honour. I am deeply touched to receive this AWARD. The WAPOR Asia Lifetime Achievement Award, established by WAPOR Asia in 2017 to encourage practitioners to have their work recognised and appreciated by peers, is a prestigious honour for significant contributions to the field of public opinion. Public opinion in Asia is not new. India learned of Dr. Eric da Costa's contributions to the Indian Institute of Public Opinion (IIPO) in the early 1950s. It was the first organization to conduct a public opinion study on an election.

Several pioneers in Asia have led the growth of the field. I have contributed by conducting interviews with 10 pioneers in public opinion, all of whom are being recorded for record purposes. These pioneers are Dr. Mahar Mangahas of the Social Weather Station in the Philippines, Dr. Ijaz Gilani of Pakistan Gallup, Robert Chung from Hong Kong, Yashwant Deshmukh from India, and Prof. Takashi Inoguchi from Japan. I feel relatively young when I compare my work with that of such notables. Other pioneers are Prof. Chi Huang from Taiwan, Dr. Pradeep Peiris from Sri Lanka, Prof. Dr. Saiful Mujani from Indonesia, M Saidul Haq from Bangladesh, and Darren Pennay from Australia.

Not much is known about public opinion surveys being conducted in then Malaya but in 1954, the United States Information Agency funded a study called "Communications and Public Opinion" in Malaya to learn more about current issues among Malaysians. Another organisation, the Far East Research Organization conducted a survey in March and April 1961 for the Government on radio listenership in Malaya.

More studies on public opinion were later conducted or sponsored by government agencies and the private sector. The surveys marked the era in which public opinion was sought as feedback on the performance of government and institutions. The significance of public opinion in society is appreciated. The Malaysian Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, when officiating at the WAPOR Asia Conference in Kuala Lumpur in 2020, clearly stated that the government valued public opinion as an input into its various policies and programmes.

My Beginning

I have always been interested in public opinion because I associate it with the role of the mass media. I started my career as a journalist with the National News Agency in 1968. I had the opportunity to follow the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, during the 1969 General Elections for several weeks, thus giving me, for the first time, an idea of how campaigns were conducted, issues were raised, and the media reported on them.

I have been a member of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) since July 1989 and was among the first to join the World Association for Public

Opinion Research (WAPOR). I recall meeting up in Dhaka with Robert Chung of Hong Kong, Yashwant Deshmukh of India, and M. Saidul Haq of Bangladesh for the inaugural meeting of WAPOR-Asia (later renamed WAPOR Asia-Pacific) in 2017. (Ijaz Gilani could not make it to Bangladesh, and so he joined us via telephone.) The idea behind the formation of the WAPOR Chapter was to provide more opportunities for practitioners and academics in public opinion research to meet and exchange ideas on the challenges and problems encountered in conducting public opinion research.

Public opinion among academics and practitioners in Malaysia was relatively new, as many felt the time was not yet right. But things were to change in the 1980s. The first public opinion survey we conducted was in 1986. As head of the Department of Communication at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) (English: National University of Malaysia), I met a friend who was a government official at the time, who suggested we conduct a more comprehensive public opinion study to better understand the government's standing with the general public. With limited funding, we carried out a nationwide public opinion survey. This experience boosted our confidence to undertake more public opinion studies on political and contemporary issues.

It was a small beginning, unprepared I was then, but the interest motivated me to continue studying and conducting public opinion research, spanning over 30 years. Over the years, others have joined in, making public opinion an area of study. Public opinion was not just asking the public on political issues, as we were given grants to cover varied regions of concern (people's problems with Inflation).

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (and, later the International Islamic University Malaysia) offered a course in public relations, which I had the privilege to teach. I made the course in public opinion a practical experience for students by taking them to the field to conduct interviews with the villagers and other affected subjects. The support from the university authorities was indeed most helpful, as the buses were provided free of charge and, at times, the university funded student accommodation.

My interest in public opinion continued after I left Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Several government and private organisations were beginning to be interested in public opinion, and this augurs well for us, as we were given adequate funding. We covered general elections by conducting public opinion research in several national, state and by-elections for our polling and public opinion survey since 1989. I gather that many organizations and political parties were conducting public opinion surveys, as they found the results useful for building their strategies.

We used face-to-face interviews in conducting our research. The most recent face-to-face surveys we conducted were in September 2021, after receiving funding for two in 2020. I was also fortunate that my two universities supported me in recording the campaigns during the election seasons, when we were conducting our fieldwork. As a result, we were able to have video recordings of the campaigns during the national and state elections, which are now stored in the university libraries and the national archive. What are the achievements that I would like to cherish:

1. I am fortunate to have worked in two wonderful institutions, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and the International Islamic University Malaysia, which provided me with the incentives and support, thus enabling me to do my work. They have provided the transport, the allowances, and the facilities, which also benefited the students who were able to go along to do their fieldwork.
2. My departmental colleagues who have given me the academic and administrative support. Help from my colleagues in the other departments and faculties was invaluable.

3. The students in the early days and later the enumerators and supervisors who have been with me for more than 15 years. This has made possible the face-to-face interviews because of the rapport we had with the enumerators, supervisors and participants.
4. My administrative staff, who encountered and solved numerous problems in making sure that the surveys were well managed.
5. I am happy that politicians (Government and Opposition) have also given their cooperation when approaches were made to them.

The factors listed above have made it possible for me to look at the trend over a period of several years. We can see the decline of dominant parties and leaders and the emergence of new issues to better appreciate the political changes in society. However significant we may regard the development of public opinion, we must also remain guarded that the factors that contributed to its growth may also retard it. What then are the factors that are necessary for public opinion research?

1. There must be general acceptance of public opinion in society. People must really appreciate that pollsters' findings on public opinion accurately reflect public opinion and the issues highlighted. Properly collected issues will give guidance on the real mood of the people for the general public and policymakers to evaluate and accept.
2. The pioneers whom I interviewed mentioned that new emerging organisations, at times, give leeway to accuracy to win over clients or to make the findings pleasing to their ears to gain clients. If this is common enough, it would slowly erode public opinion research organisations' credibility in the eyes of the general public.
3. For public opinion research to develop, the government and its agencies must realise the importance of public opinion. Hence, it is important for public opinion agencies to engage the government to demonstrate that impartiality and objectivity are essential to conducting opinion research.
4. The public and the media must constantly be reminded of the strengths and weaknesses of public opinion polling. The public and the media are essential in reaching out to the government.
5. We must also reach out to the academics and trainers to show them the importance of public opinion to inform them that methodologies do change, and discussions with others are important.
6. All in all, I must thank the Malaysian voters who have given me their utmost cooperation. Of course, we had been rejected, but the general public has been cooperative in giving their time to answer our questions.
7. Once again, I must thank Yashwant, WAPOR Asia, and the committee members for their decision to award me with this highly regarded recognition, which I will always treasure for the rest of my life.

Thank you.
Syed Arabi Idid