

Malaysian Runners Survey

By Dr. Ong Kian Ming, Member of Parliament for Serdang

Email: im.ok.man@gmail.com

30th of July 2017

1) Introduction

Running is now such a popular sport in Malaysia that runners, especially in the Klang Valley, are now spoiled for choice in terms of the number of races they can participate in during the weekends. It is not unusual for there to be 2 or 3 races held on a Sunday, a situation that would not have been common even as recently as 10 years ago. A small race would attract around 1,000 runners, a moderate size race would attract between 3,000 to 5,000 runners while a big race would have more than 10,000 participants. Other than road races, trail races and ultra-marathons (anything longer than 42km) are also becoming more popular as runners seek other challenges beyond the road.

The range of races vary a great deal. Marque events such as the Standard Chartered Kuala Lumpur Marathon and the Penang Bridge International Marathon attract more than 30,000 participants across various distances, are sponsored by many big companies and give out attractive cash prizes for the winners. Small events such as charity runs are organized as 'fun-runs' without any prize money. Increasingly, races differentiate themselves in terms of branding to attract more participants. For example, themed races such as Superhero runs, Halloween runs and Electric runs are now part and parcel of the running calendar. The popularity of races has spread beyond the Klang Valley. Penang and Johor have between two to four runs a month. Even smaller cities such as Kuantan and Ipoh have more races compared to before.

With increasing number of races and participants, a few issues of concern have emerged. Since I am a regular runner and have also participated and continue to participate in races, I decided to conduct a survey among the running community in Malaysia to collect views on the following issues: (i) The cost of participating in races in Malaysia (ii) Whether or not race organizers should be accredited by a government body (iii) The participation of non-Malaysians in local races (iv) Bib-Switching and Selling. These are NOT the only issues facing the running community in Malaysia but these are the issues which I will focus on in this survey.

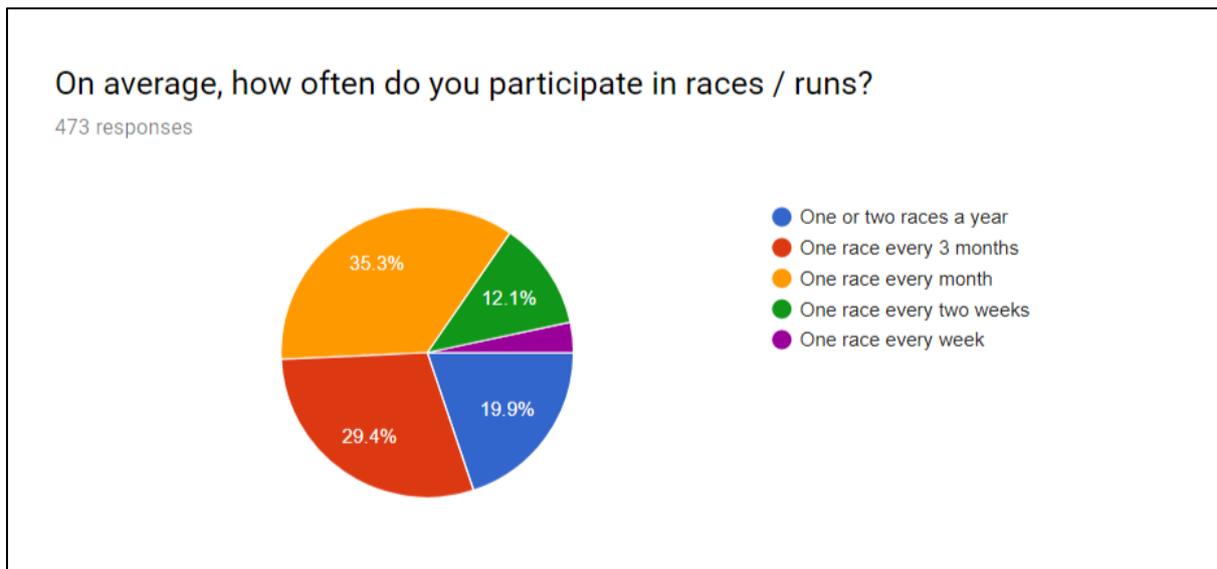
2) Respondents

A "Malaysian Runners' Survey" was designed using google docs.¹ 473 unique responses were collected over 2 weeks (from the 17th to the 30th of July, 2017). 331 of the respondents were male (70%) while 143 were female (30%). 354 respondents were over 30 years of age (74.8%), 114 respondents from 18 to 30 years of age (24.1%) and 5 were below 18 years of age (1.1%). Almost all of the respondents were Malaysia (457 out of 473 or 96.6%). Most of the respondents (374 out of 473 or 79.1%) had never won any cash prizes in a race.

About half of the respondents (50.8%) participates in at least one race a month (on average). 29.4% of respondents participated in one race every three months and 19.9% ran in one or two races a year. (Figure 1 below)

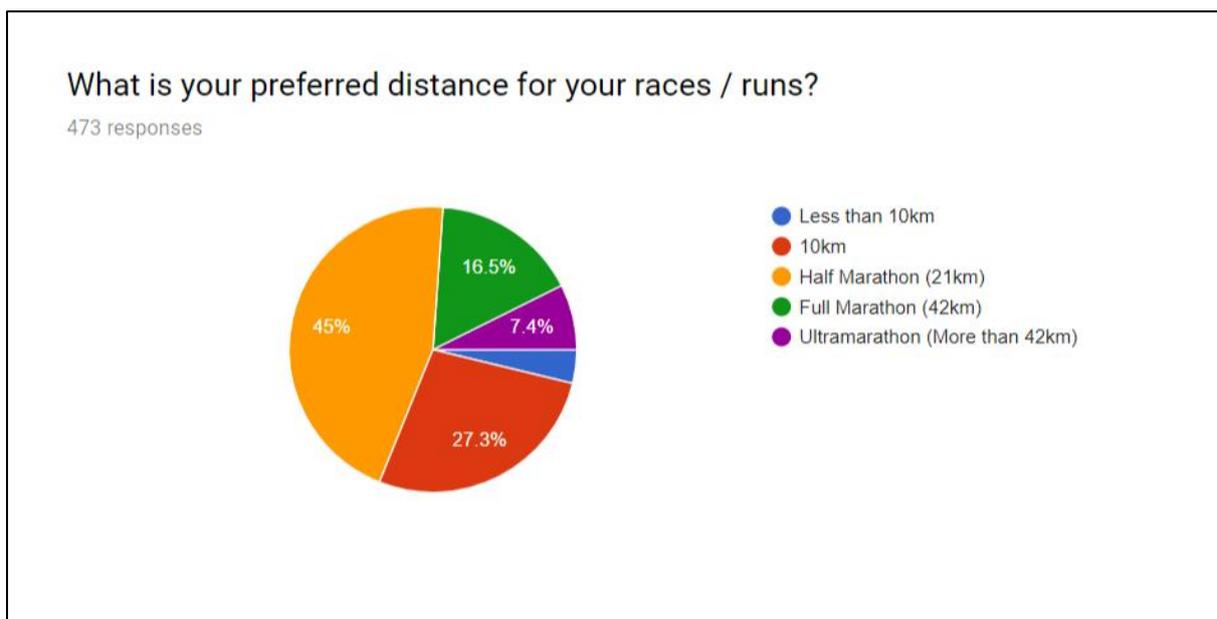
¹ <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1fLzyuDKh1aPltpmuvbdgmCfj1Fqod17CvMuwU675MhE/edit#responses>

Figure 1: Responses to the question “On average, how often do you participate in races / runs?”



The preferred distance among 45% of the respondents was the Half-Marathon (21km) followed by the 10km (27.3%), followed by the full marathon (16.5%). (Figure 2 below)

Figure 2: Responses to the question “What is your preferred distance for your races / runs”

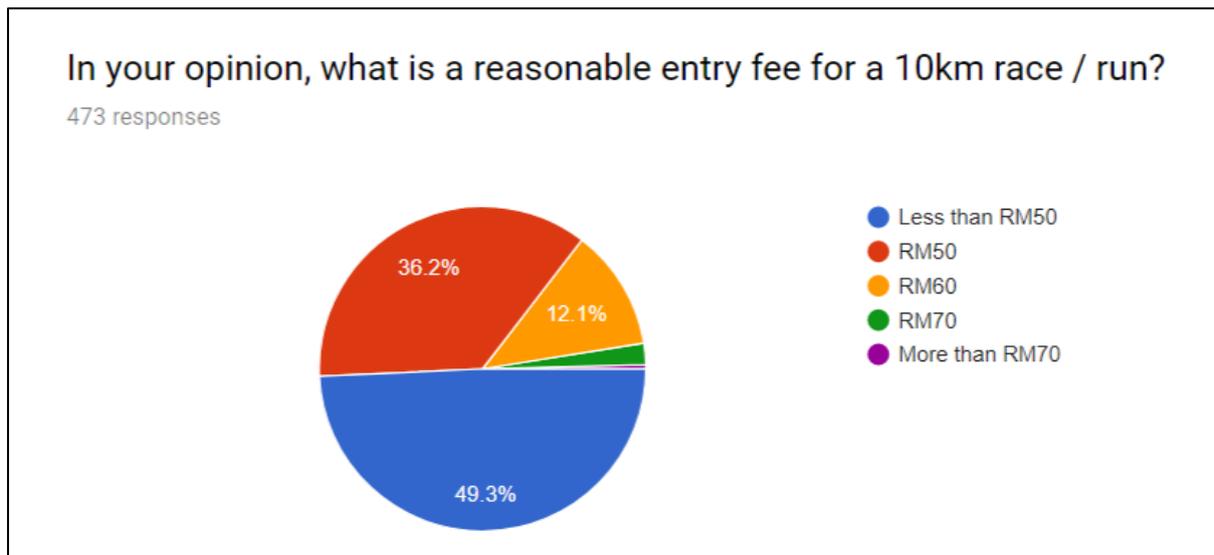


The respondents to this survey are probably more active than the average runner since many of them are in running groups which I am part of and whose activities I keep track of. This means that they probably participate in more races than the average runner and prefers longer races than the average runner. They are also more aware of the quality of the races organized in Malaysia.

3) Race entry fees

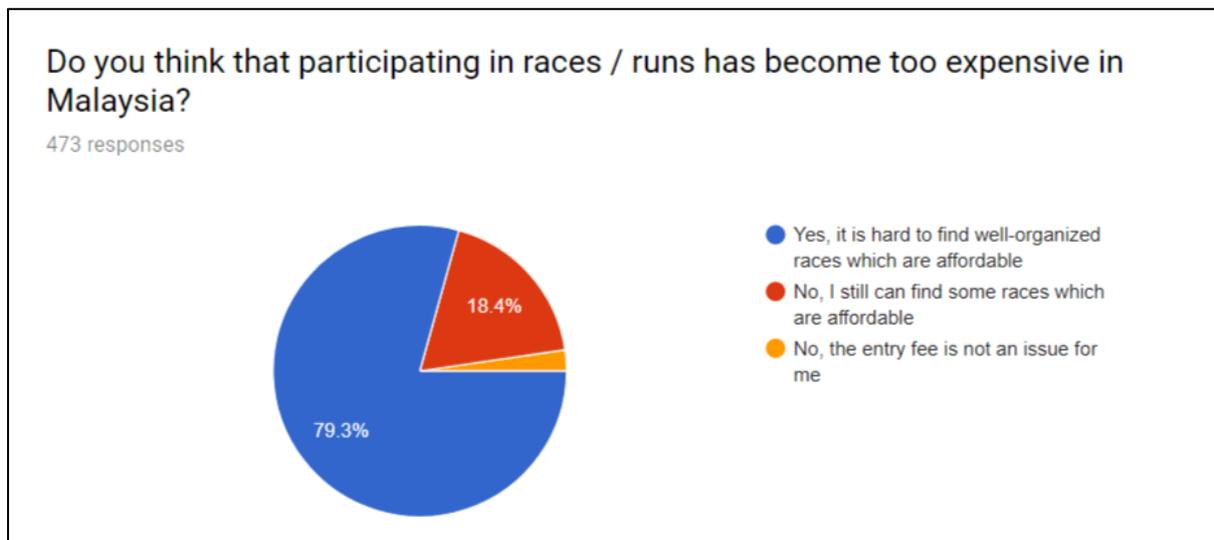
One of the questions in the survey asked the respondents what they thought a reasonable entry fee is for a 10km race. Almost half of the respondents (49.3%) said that a reasonable entry fee is less than RM50 while 36.2% felt that RM50 was a reasonable fee (Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: Responses to the question of “what is a reasonable entry fee for a 10km race”



Given the responses in Figure 3, it is not surprising that 79.3% of respondents said that it is hard to find well-organized races which are affordable (Figure 4 below).

Figure 4: Responses to the question of “Do you think that participating in races has become too expensive in Malaysia?”



Most 10km races these days cost RM60 and above. Of course, the decision to participate in these races is in the hands of runners. If they feel that the race is not worth the entry fee, they can choose not to participate in these races. Sometimes, race sponsors can find themselves facing backlash from runners if the entry fee is seen as exorbitant. A 12km race sponsored by a running apparel company was priced at RM119 and much criticism was directed towards the company because of this high entry fee. Races which find themselves being undersubscribed because of high entry fees may find itself on the losing end, financially, because of the smaller number of participants. While there does not seem to be an aggressive call yet for entry fees to be regulated or capped, the findings of this survey is a demonstration that running events which are sponsored by the federal, state or local government should be priced affordably to make these events accessible to as many as possible.

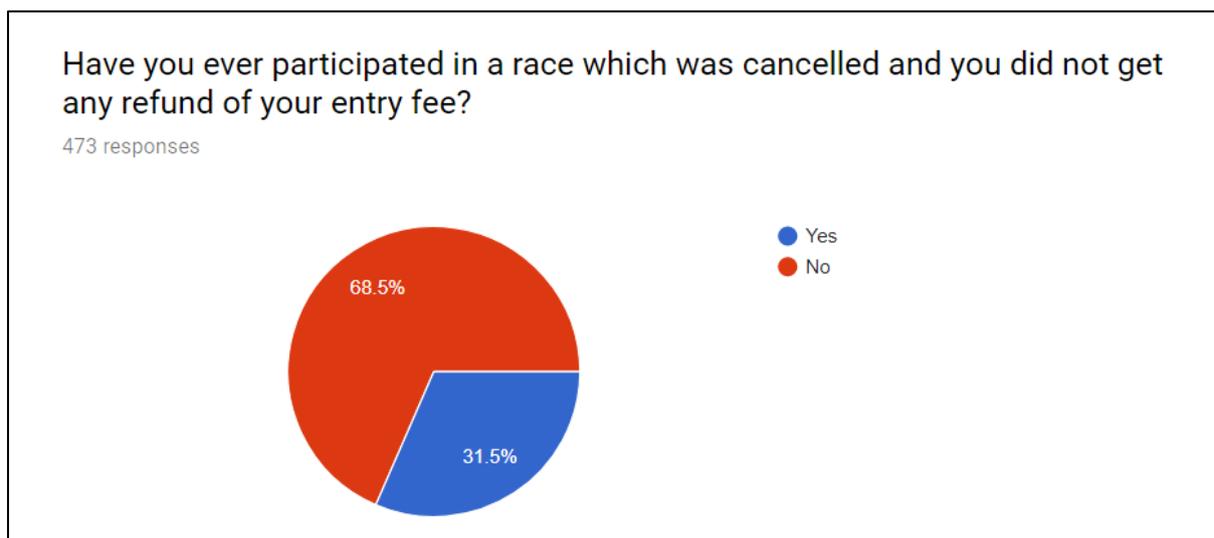
For example, the SEA Games 2017 run in Putrajaya on the 19th of August is priced at RM60 for a 15km run.² This run is organized by the Malaysian Organizing Committee (MASOC) for the Kuala Lumpur 2017 SEA games in collaboration with the Olympic Council of Malaysia (OCM) and the Malaysian Athletics Federation (MAF).

4) Race Organization

One of the complaints which I have come across, directly and indirectly, is the issue of races which are postponed and / or cancelled and runners who have already paid the entry fee and cannot get back a refund. 324 of the respondents or 68.5% said that they have had no such experience. 149 or 31.5% said that they have had such an experience (Figure 5 below). 47 out of the 149 respondents (31.5%) who experienced a cancelled event and did not get a refund cited the 2015 Standard Chartered Kuala Lumpur and the 2015 Putrajaya Marathon both of which were cancelled because of the haze problem. Other runs which were cancelled and referred to by the respondents include the 2015 HRDF Half Marathon, the Manchester United Peace Run 2015 and the AmMetLive 2017 run. Reasons given by the respondents for the cancellation of these races include an insufficient number of participants, the pull out of a main sponsor and bad organization on the part of the event management company which was organizing the race.

Based on my experience, the running community in Malaysia is relatively sophisticated. Word of mouth regarding event organizers which are not so reputable or races which are badly organized gets around quickly via social media. After a bad experience, well-informed runners and running groups will not likely participate in the same race in the future and possibly other races organized by the same event manager. Of course, for the less experience runners or the 'newbies', they may not be so aware and still sign up for such events. This is perhaps what some of those 'scam runs' are hoping for – that enough gullible runners will sign up before the event is 'postponed' and eventually cancelled without any refunds being given out.

Figure 5: Responses to the question of “Have you ever participated in a race which was cancelled and you did not get any refund of your entry fee?”



Even though only a minority of respondents had experienced cancelled races without refunds, a majority of respondents supported or strongly supported (77.6%) the proposal for the government to

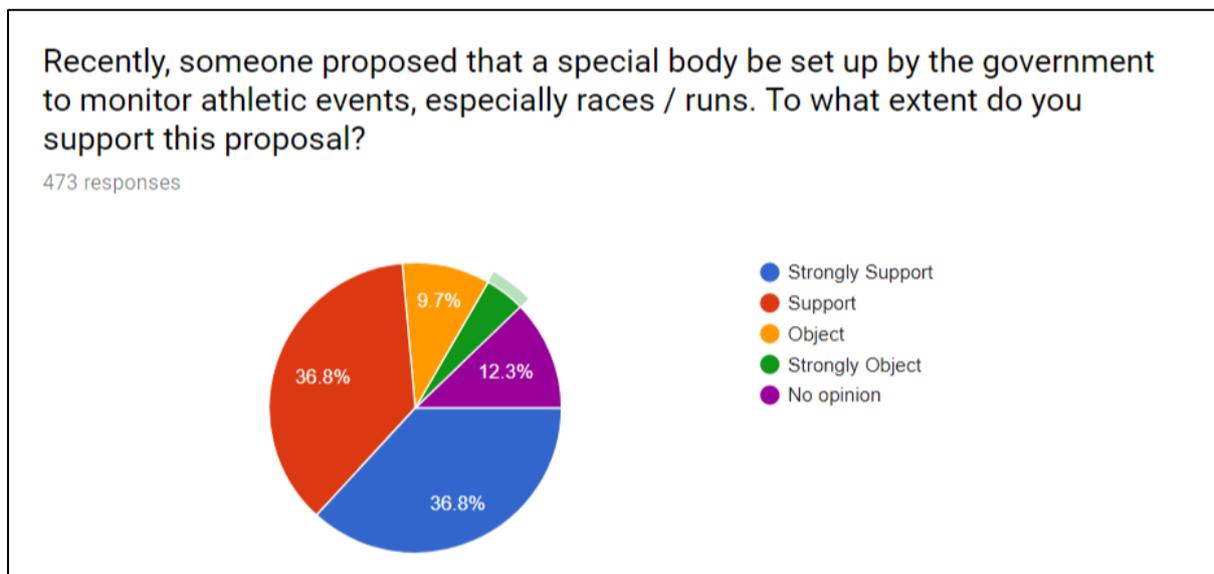
² <http://home.hooha.asia/lariansukanse2017.aspx>

set up a special body to monitor athletic events, especially races (Figure 6 below). This question was prompted by a few newspaper reports featuring this very proposal.³

The fact that such a large % of respondents support this proposal shows that there is current dissatisfaction among the running community over the races which are being organized. Some of the comments reflect the desire to have better event organizers who will not 'run away with the money' or cancel races without any notice or reason given. Some of the comments reflect the desire to have better organized races with proper Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) so that the quality of races can be maintained at a high level. Some respondents also want this body to ensure that the entry fee for races remain affordable.

Although they are in the minority, respondents who object to this proposal express their concern that having this body will increase the entry fee for races and that there will be too much red tape imposed on the race organizers. Some respondents also say that the market can regulate itself through social media.

Figure 6: Responses to the question of “To what extent do you support the proposal that a special body be set up by the government to monitor athletic events, especially races / runs?”



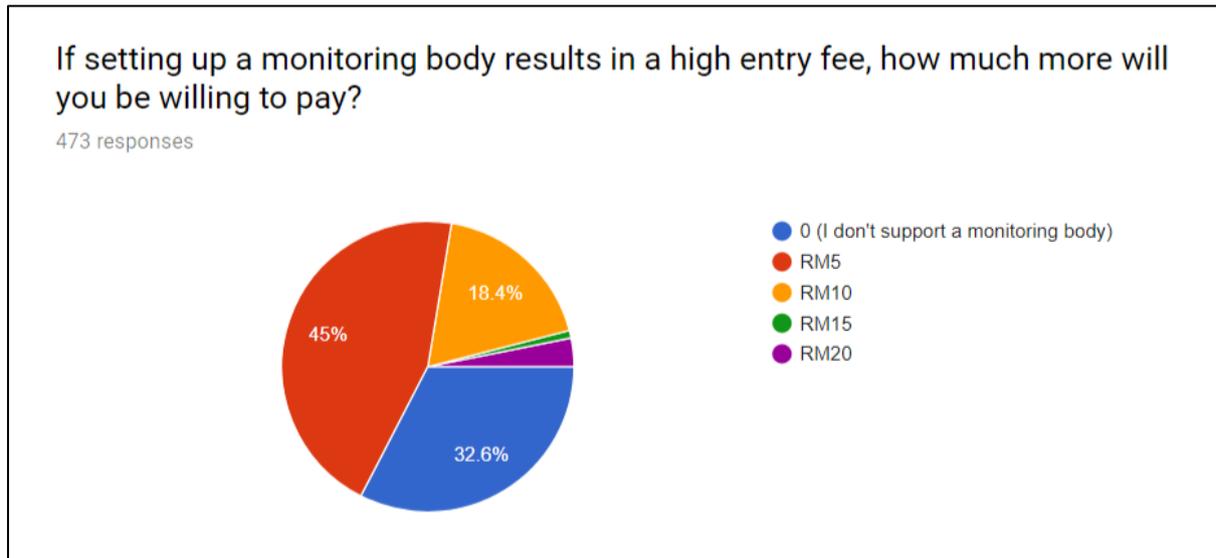
This survey did not probe further into the possible composition of this monitoring body, how it would be funded, the scale and scope of this body and who will be responsible for overseeing such a body. For example, would it be an existing organization such as the Malaysian Athletics Federation (MAF) or the Olympic Council of Malaysia (OCM)? Would it be a special unit set up under the Ministry of Youth and Sports? Would it be an NGO which is recognized by runners as a credible organization? The devil is always in the detail and it is important for the relevant authorities to seek out the views of different stakeholders (runners, event organizers, sponsors, just to name a few) to come up with a framework that is transparent, representative and effective.

It is possible that the establishment of such a monitoring body may increase the cost of organizing runs. For example, this body may impose a deposit charge for race organizers in case the race gets cancelled. Or a portion of entry fees may have to be used to fund the operational costs of such a body.

³ Runner, Juani Abu Bakar, was one of those who made this proposal (<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/features/article/running-enthusiasts-call-for-monitoring-body>)

In the survey, I asked the question of how much more a respondent is willing to pay if the establishment of such a monitoring body results in higher entry fees. Almost a third, 32.6%, said that they would not be willing to pay any money for this monitoring body while 45% said that they were willing to pay RM5 more per race with another 18.4% willing to pay RM10 more per race (See Figure 7 below).

Figure 7: Responses to the question of “how much more will you be willing to pay if a monitoring body for races is set up”?



These responses show that while a majority of respondents want a monitoring body to be set up, they are less willing to pay more in terms of entry fees as a consequence of establishing this monitoring body.

5) Non-Malaysians participating in races

In this section, I try to capture the public sentiment regarding non-Malaysians participating in races held in Malaysia. The issues here are (i) whether or not non-Malaysians should be allowed to compete in runs in Malaysia (ii) whether or not non-Malaysians should pay more than Malaysians to compete in the same runs (iii) whether or not non-Malaysians should be allowed to compete for prize money in these runs.

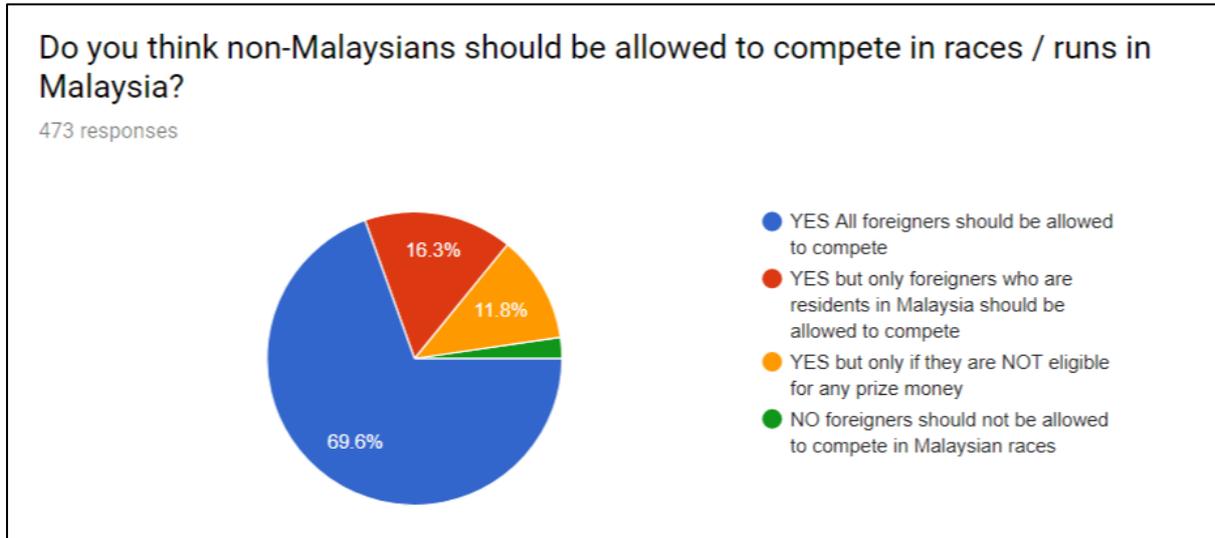
For the international marathons such as the Standard Chartered Kuala Lumpur Marathon and the Penang Bridge International Marathons, there are no restrictions on non-Malaysians participating and also winning prizes. There are separate prize categories for Malaysians and non-Malaysians. Non-Malaysians must pay more compared to Malaysians in terms of the entry fee. Charging non-citizens a higher price, regardless of resident status, is also practised by other international marathons in the region such as the Standard Chartered Hong Kong Marathon and the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon.

The issue of non-Malaysians not being allowed to participate and / or win prize money affects mostly the medium sized races with between 3000 and 10000 participants. Some of these races will allow non-Malaysians to participate but not be eligible to win prizes in they are placed in, let's say, the top 10. Some of these races do not allow non-Malaysians to even sign up for these races.

Among the respondents of this survey, 69.6% feels that non-Malaysians should be allowed to compete in races in Malaysia. Another 16.3% feels that only non-Malaysians who are residents in Malaysia

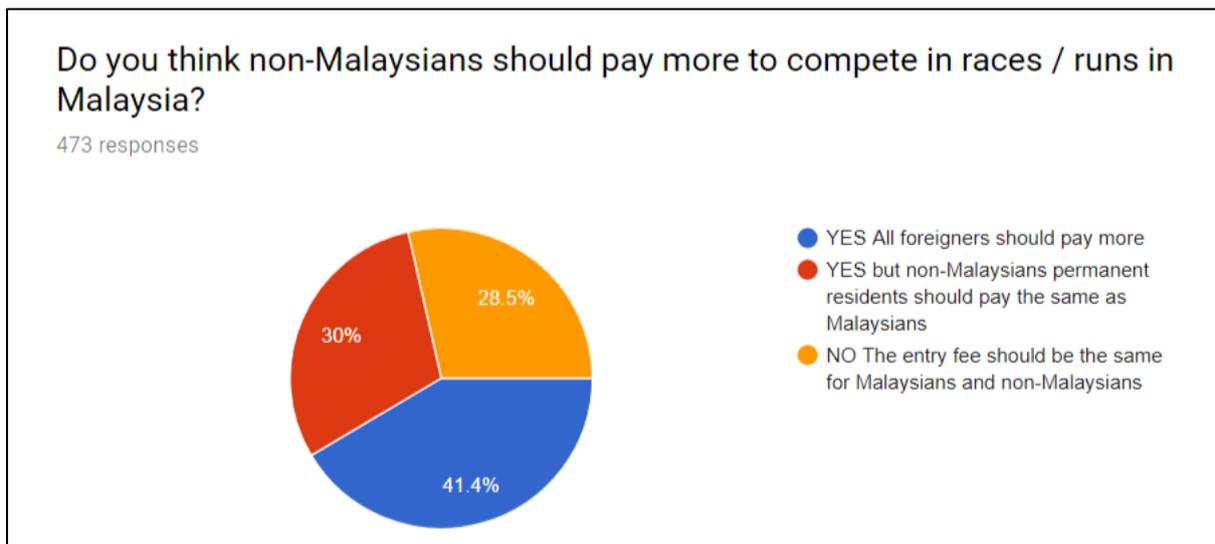
should be allowed to compete. 11.8% feels that non-Malaysians should be allowed to compete but they should not be eligible for any prize money (Figure 8 below).

Figure 8: Responses to the question of “Do you think non-Malaysians should be allowed to compete in races / runs in Malaysia”?



On the question of where non-Malaysians should pay more to compete in races in Malaysia, 41.4% thinks that non-Malaysians should pay more, 30% thinks that non-Malaysians permanent residents should pay the same as Malaysians while 28.5% thinks that the entry fee should be the same for Malaysians and non-Malaysians. (See Figure 9 below)

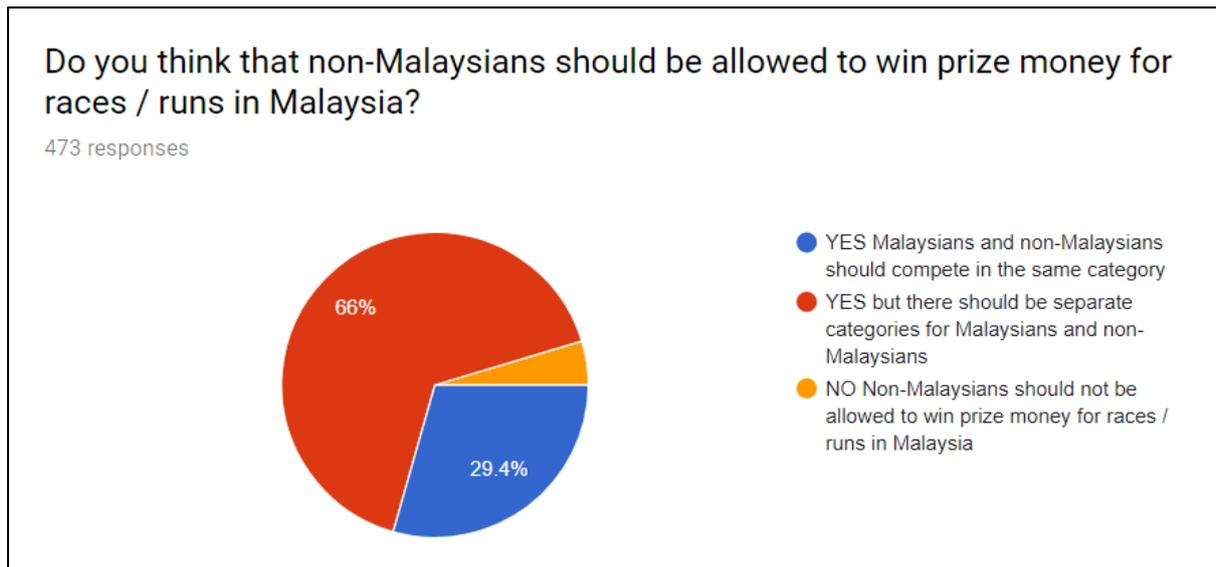
Figure 9: Responses to the question of “Do you think non-Malaysians should pay more to compete in races / runs in Malaysia”?



There is no clear consensus on the entry fee issue for non-Malaysians although one could say that 60% of respondents don't want non-Malaysians (either permanent residents or otherwise) to be discriminated against in terms of entry fees. It would be interesting to explore further what the running community thinks would be a reasonable additional amount to charge non-Malaysians who participate in races in Malaysia.

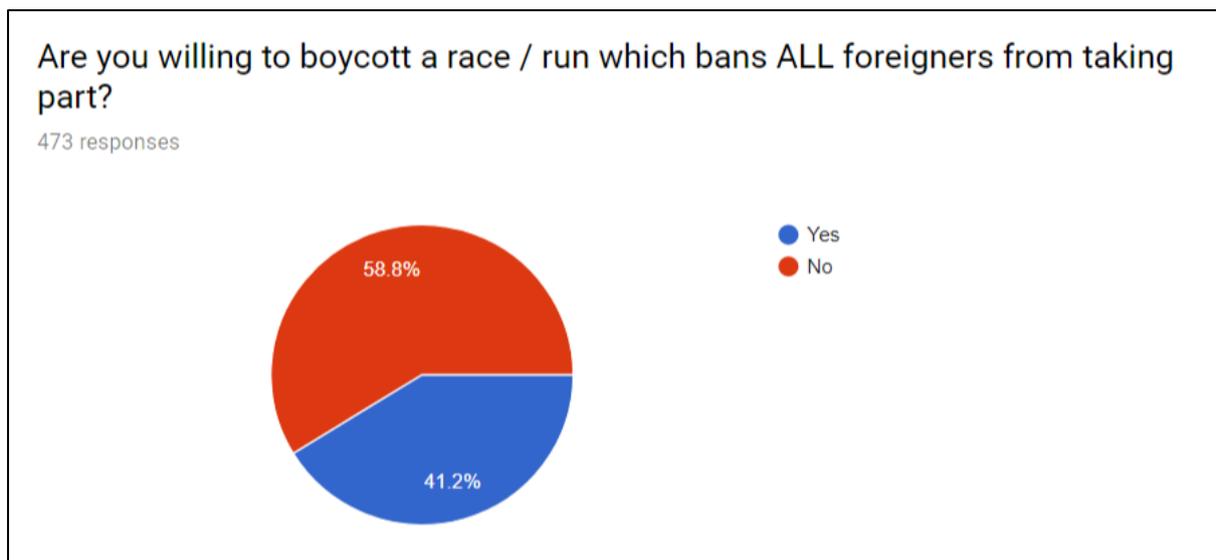
On the question of prize money, a clear majority of respondents, 66%, thinks that non-Malaysians should be allowed to win prize money but that there should be separate categories for Malaysians and non-Malaysians. 29.4% said that Malaysians and non-Malaysians should compete in the same category for the same prize money.

Figure 10: Responses to the question of “Do you think non-Malaysians should be allowed to win prize money for in races / runs in Malaysia”?



Finally, to gauge how strongly respondents feel about races which bans all non-Malaysians from participating in, the survey asked whether respondents were willing to boycott such races. A majority, 58.8% said that they would NOT boycott such a race although 41%, a not insignificant number, said that would be willing to boycott such a race (Figure 11 below). Race organizers and sponsors of races should take note of the possible public reaction if it was made known that a particular race is not allowing non-Malaysians to participate.

Figure 10: Responses to the question of “Are you willing to boycott a race / run which bans ALL foreigners from taking part?”



In this section of the survey, there were many strong opinions shared in the additional comments section. Most of these opinions were NOT in favour of discrimination against non-Malaysia. Some of the comments include:

“If a Malaysian were to win a race in a foreign country and wasn't allowed to be declared a winner, many would argue its discriminatory. Why should we allow such practice here?”

“I think everyone should be treated the same, no discrimination. Besides, banning foreigners from races is just another attempt to molly coddle Malaysians who would otherwise have won no awards and been no match for their foreign counterparts.”

“Our local running scene should never have, and should never be tainted with racism and exclusion of participants on the grounds of nationality. This is discrimination.”

“Our local running scene should never have, and should never be tainted with racism and exclusion of participants on the grounds of nationality. This is discrimination.”

Most of the other comments emphasized the need for separate Malaysian and non-Malaysian categories. Some expressed concern over the presence of African / Kenyan running syndicates who would completely dominate the local races if there were no separate Malaysian / non-Malaysian categories. In reality, unless the prize money is very attractive (more than US\$1000), the incentives are not sufficient to attract the overseas racing syndicates. Where there is sufficient prize money, it would not be too difficult to create a separate category for non-Malaysians with perhaps a smaller number of places allocated for prize winners. This way, non-Malaysians will have a chance to participate and win prize money but not at the detriment of local runners who can also claim their podium positions.

A more exhaustive study looking at the differences in races which allow non-Malaysians to win prizes and those which do not would give us a better indication of the extent to which non-Malaysian elite runners participate in local races and the differences in performance between the non-Malaysian and Malaysian elite runners.

6) Bib-Swapping / Selling

The final section of the survey is on the practice of bib-swapping / selling. It is not uncommon for runners to find out that they cannot make it for a run because of work and family commitments, injury, and a whole host of other reasons. In such cases, these runners have a few options. They can either give away their bib for someone else to run in their place or they can sell their bib to another runner who wants to run in this race but failed to register in time for the race.

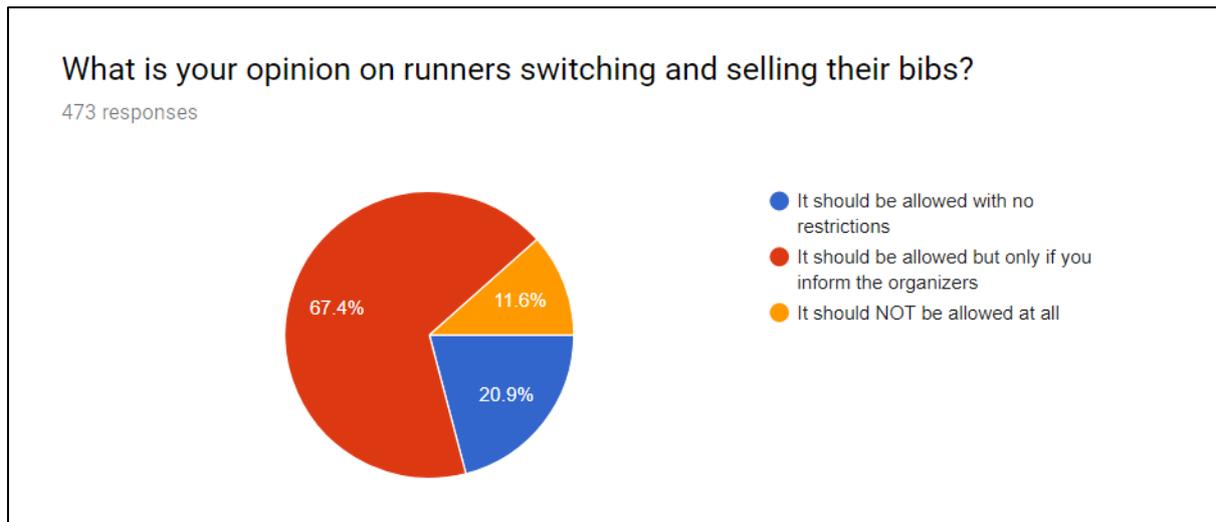
Sometimes, runners decide at the last minute that they want to downgrade their race distance (from 21km to 10km, for example) or to upgrade their race distance (from 21km to 42km, for example). In these cases, they will offer to ‘swap’ their bibs from someone who wants to upgrade or downgrade in the opposition direction.

Nearly all of this is done currently via informal channels e.g. word of mouth, friends, social media. The race organizers are not notified. Most of the time, there are no serious consequences to this. The bib-swappers / sellers do not usually finish among the prize winners and thankfully, they do not experience a medical emergency. There have been a limited number of cases whereby an elite runner has been caught with a bib of another runner. The usual consequence is that elite runners who are caught bib-swapping are banned for a time from participating in these races. More seriously, if a bib-swapping runner experiences a serious medical emergency e.g. a heart attack, the race organizers may not be

able to contact his or her family because the contact details listed in the bib are not of his or her family but someone else family. This is one of the reasons why many people object to the practice of bib-swapping / selling.

Surprisingly, 67.4% of respondents felt that the practice of bib-switching and selling should be allowed on the condition that the race organizers should be informed first. Another 20.9% thinks that there should be no restrictions to the practice of bib-switching and selling. Only 11.6% of respondents totally object to this practice (Figure 11 below).

Figure 11: Responses to the question of “What is your opinion on runners switching and selling their bibs?”



The challenge with allowing bib-switching and selling is that most organizers will not have the capacity to monitor this and to update its records. Most of the international runs such as SCKL and PBIM do not allow for bib-switching and swapping, probably because of the larger number of participants involved in these races. It would be logistically unwieldy. There may be other legal implications too especially in the case of medical emergencies whereby the correct contact details of the affected runner may not have been updated on his or her bib and in the records of the organizer. If bib-switching and selling were to be allowed formally, there would need to be a much better tracking system employed by the race organizers.

7) Conclusion

In conclusion, this survey has found consensus views on a number of issues that are of concern to the running community. Firstly, a majority of respondents feel that it is increasingly difficult to find runs which are both affordable and well-organized, in the entry price range of RM50 and below. Secondly, a majority of respondents support a proposal for the government to set up a monitoring body for races in Malaysia. Thirdly, a majority of respondents feel that non-Malaysians should be allowed to participate in races in Malaysia and that they should be allowed to win prizes but with the condition that there is a separate category for non-Malaysians. Lastly, a majority of Malaysians agree with bib-switching but with the caveat that the race organizers must be informed.

The findings from this report will be submitted to the Ministry of Youth and Sports and also emailed to race organisers in Malaysia. A copy will be posted on my website (www.ongkianming.com) and also on my facebook page.