

Public Opinion on the Yangon Bus System and its Reform

Yangon School of Political Science

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I. Introduction

With the National League for Democracy's (NLD) landslide victory in the 2015 general election, the expectations of the people have increased greatly. It is obvious that, in comparison with other regional countries, the overall political and living conditions of the Burmese people were explicitly left behind for over 60 years due to the rule of the military-backed dictatorship. Since the country's 2010 transition to democracy, the desire and passion of the citizens to develop and catch up to international trends has only grown, reaching a peak around time of the NLD's election triumph in 2015.

The strong will of the people to achieve higher national development and make progress in raising the country's socioeconomic status was observed in the case of the reform of the Public Transportation System initiated by the Yangon Regional government in early 2016. People were largely dissatisfied with the performance of the old system (Ma Hta Tha), and their desperation for something better allowed them to be swept away by the spreading news of the impending Yangon Bus System at that time.

However, since its introduction, the newly established (YBS) system has revealed some of innate structural weaknesses, especially in terms of the bus schedules and route maps. In spite of that, people were quite willing to endure these initial hardships as they remembered the struggles of the previous system held out hope that the reform had the potential to improve the situation. Yangon School of Political Science (YSPS) conducted a public opinion poll on the recently established Yangon Bus System. And we were able to come with the optimism of its users and willingness to contributing to proceeding further reform measures such as national development and cities development by the users and the people.

II. Research Methodology

Yangon School of Political Science did a survey on the opinions of commuters who ride Yangon Buses. The survey was conducted to the best of our capacity, although financial and human resource limitations, as well as the limited availability of respondents, may have impacted the results. Surveyors visited crowded places, public squares and bus stops in Yangon and asked commuters who were willing to answer and had enough time to respond to the survey questions. A total of fifteen survey questions were answered by five hundred respondents. Yangon School of Political Science employed some questions from public transportation research in other

countries and developed others tailored to the Yangon Bus System to create the questionnaire. In addition, YSPS interviewed MPs from Yangon Regional Parliament, some directors from bus line companies, and some representatives from public transportation groups in order to collect additional opinions from a variety of perspectives on the changes to the public bus system. However, YSPS was unable to observe the implementation of instructions by the Yangon Regional government and policy making sessions because of limited access to information and a lack of transparency. This lack of access was unfortunate as we consider these observations necessary to gain a truly insightful understanding of the changes to the Yangon Bus System. As a result, YSPS chose to focus on the improvements to the public bus system and examine public opinion regarding these changes.

III. Literature Review

Problems of Ma Hta Tha

Prior to the introduction of the new bus system (Yangon Bus Service), Yangon's bus network was overseen by the Yangon Motor Vehicles Supervisory Committee (colloquially referred to as Ma Hta Tha and better known by its Myanmar acronym Ma Hta Tha). The public transportation monitored by Ma Hta Tha was criticized for being ill-equipped to serve commuters, having a shortage of buses, the misconduct of bus staff, and constant violation of traffic rules. Yangon's bus drivers are notorious for excessive speeding, reckless driving and flouting traffic rules while causing many traffic accidents. Fare-gouging was the worst problem in Yangon's public transport, with drivers sometimes charging twice the posted fare at night, or during times of heavy congestion. Overcharging typically took place at night. The conductors threatened to kick passengers off the bus if they didn't pay the extra money. Bus drivers also drove dangerously to pick up more commuters than their competition. The bus conductors (locally known as 'spares') were also heavily criticized for their poor attitudes, constant overcharging, and habit of forcing passengers to get in or out of the bus.

Objectives of the Reform

On February 16th 2017, Yangon Regional Government abolished the notoriously disserviceable Ma Hta Tha Bus system. The Yangon Region Transport Authority (YRTA) was then formed to start the transformation of the Yangon Bus System. Before the reform, YRTA had a meeting with former Ma Hta Tha officials to design the new bus system. So the new bus system was designed to solve the problems of old bus system although it was not based on any public policy research or public consultation. Dr Mg Aung, Chief Executive of YRTA, said in a phone interview that the main objectives of YBS are to provide safe and comfortable public transportation, and better services. In addition, there are other aims such as the reduction of traffic jams and the equalization of bus fares. To accomplish the main objectives of YRTA, the Yangon government instructed all bus lines to form public companies and tried to put these under the unique system of YRTA. The most recent data shows that as of 2017, Yangon's population in 2017 was approximately 6.2 million and Ma Hta Tha served the majority of the city's 2.8 million commuters daily. Private bus companies also ran lines throughout the city on a smaller scale. Of the 7,800 buses registered in Yangon, 4,000 of them plied the streets of Yangon daily, covering over three hundred bus lines. YBS was started with total of 4,000 buses running on 69 bus lines, with additional bus lines added later at the request of the commuters and the new bus companies.

Safe and Sound Transportation

Under YBS, routes are classified into two groups of downtown and suburban with the aim of ensuring safe transportation. Some buses are supposed to run on main roads in downtown area such as BoGyoke Aung San Road, Anawyahta Road, MahaBunduhala Road, Merchant Road, and Strand Road, and other buses run on suburban roads starting from Bohtataung and Thakhin Mya Park bus gates. Since there are two different main routes in YBS, downtown and suburban, those who commute from the suburbs to downtown on a daily basis find their journeys more time consuming and costly because they have to transfer between at least two bus lines.

Under the old Ma Hta Tha Bus System, buses were privately owned and all the bus fares went to private bus companies. Therefore, Ma Hta Tha could not manage to effectively eliminate bus racing to reach passengers at next stop or the practice of drivers anchoring buses at bus stops for too long to take as many passengers as possible. When Ma Hta Tha was replaced by YBS, the system changed to a one-route one-bus line system, and the plan was to add new necessary routes demanded by commuters through respective MPs. However in reality, bus owners still hesitate to accept the transformation of private bus companies into public bus companies via the allocation of shares. Moreover, the transformation made drivers who were hired before by bus owners into public bus company employees. YBS also eliminated conductors. It has thus been very hard to implement YBS because of the interests of bus owners and the problems of drivers and conductors becoming unemployed. As of this writing, there are sixteen public bus companies that are registered under YRTA and some private bus lines still operate as well. There are two types of bus lines under the public bus companies: company-owned buses bought by company shares and buses run by private individuals under company names. Company-owned buses are monitored by companies and drivers and conductors are now company employees. Private bus owners pay for the company service to run their buses under their names and pocket all of the bus fares. They also appoint drivers and conductors for their buses. There is also another type of bus line that is not operated by the public bus companies. They are called private bus owners groups who got permission from YRTA to run buses. YRTA can't stop them because they could lose their businesses and need to take time to complete the transformation into the new system.

Only company buses have stopped racing and provide good services to commuters, while privately owned buses under public companies and private buses are still continuing their old practices. There still are a lot of difficulties ahead before the goals of YBS to operate all buses under the ownership of public companies to reduce reckless driving and bus racing can be achieved.

Another plan to ensure the safety of passengers is to set up a GPS system and CCTVs. Although company buses and buses run under company names could set up a GPS system and CCTVs according to YRTA rules and criteria, privately owned buses cannot as there is no control system to monitor them.

When the Seoul Bus system was reformed in Korea, the city government used a Semi-Public Operation System by monitoring almost all bus services. The government redesigned the previous system, which had over four hundred bus lines, and made it so that there were only four types of buses with different colors. They set up an Intelligent Transport System to monitor the speed of every single bus, the locations of the buses, and facts and information relevant to drivers. They practiced a payment system for drivers and bus owners that was based on the number of kilometers they drove in order to improve bus services. Another system that offers better bus service is the Real Time Information System which provides information on the exact bus arrival times of each bus at every bus stop. Under YBS, buses are released every three or five minutes and a lot of infrastructure needs to be built to

set up an RTE system.

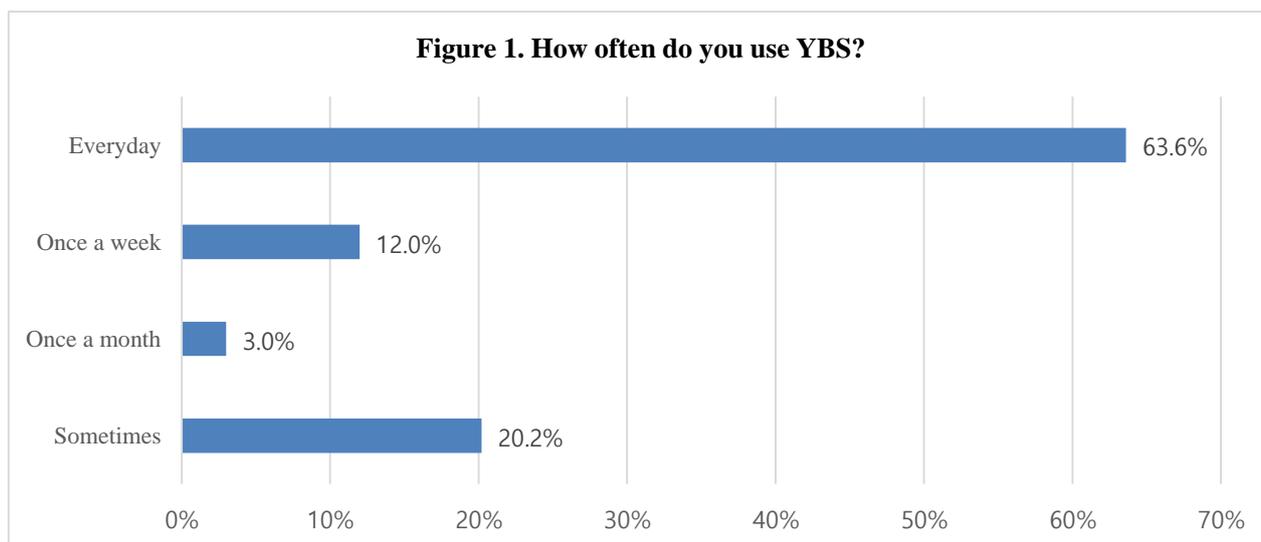
Alternative Bus Fare Payment System

Under Ma Hta Tha, there were a lot disputes between conductors and commuters because conductors charged more than the actual bus fare late in the evening and often did not provide change as a result of a scarcity of notes. YBS replaced conductors with money boxes. Passengers are supposed to put their bus fare into the money boxes. Consequently, passengers face difficulties when they do not have the exact amount of notes needed to pay for bus fare as there is no conductor to give them change. Although Yangon Chief Minister U Phyo Min Thein did suggest using a Digital Payment System, it has not been put into practice.

Another problem with YBS is that passengers have to take a least two buses to reach where they want to go, which costs them an additional bus fare. The T-Money Card and Monthly Communication Card are used to pay for the bus fare in the Seoul Bus System and passengers are charged according to the distance they travel. Likewise, an Electronic Payment System is employed in the Taichung Bus System in Taiwan. Despite some challenges and difficulties they encountered at first, passengers became very satisfied later with the transformation of the Seoul Bus System.

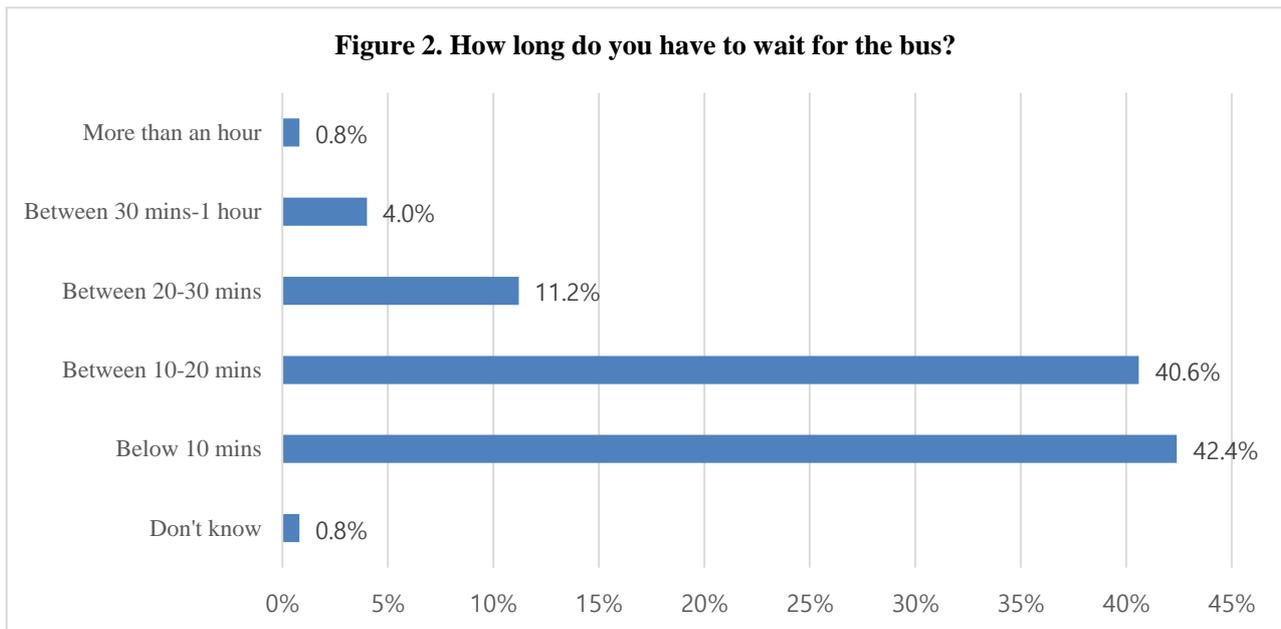
IV. Research Findings

Most of the survey respondents were daily commuters who use YBS. The first question they were asked was how often they use YBS. The majority, 63.6 percent of respondents, answered “daily”. The remaining answers fall into the categories of “sometimes”, “once a month” and “once a week”.



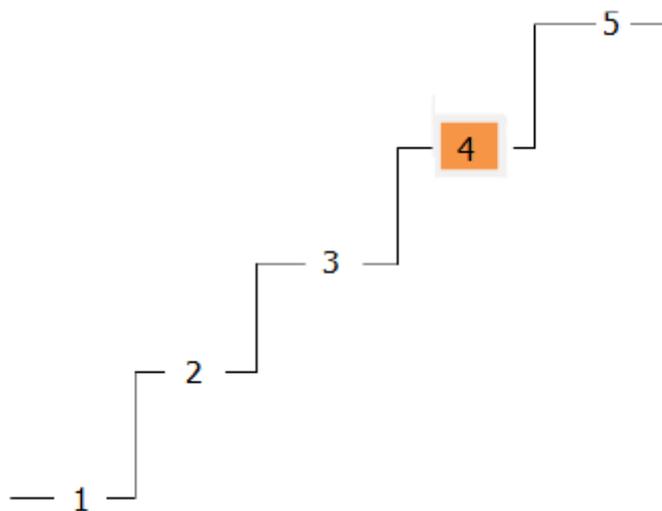
Most of the respondents answered that they spend no more than twenty minutes waiting for the bus.

We also asked how long commuters have to spend waiting for the bus. Most of them (42.4 percent) answered that they spend less than ten minutes waiting the bus and 40.6percent answered from ten to twenty minutes. About 1 percent of respondents answered that they have no idea how long they have to wait for the bus.



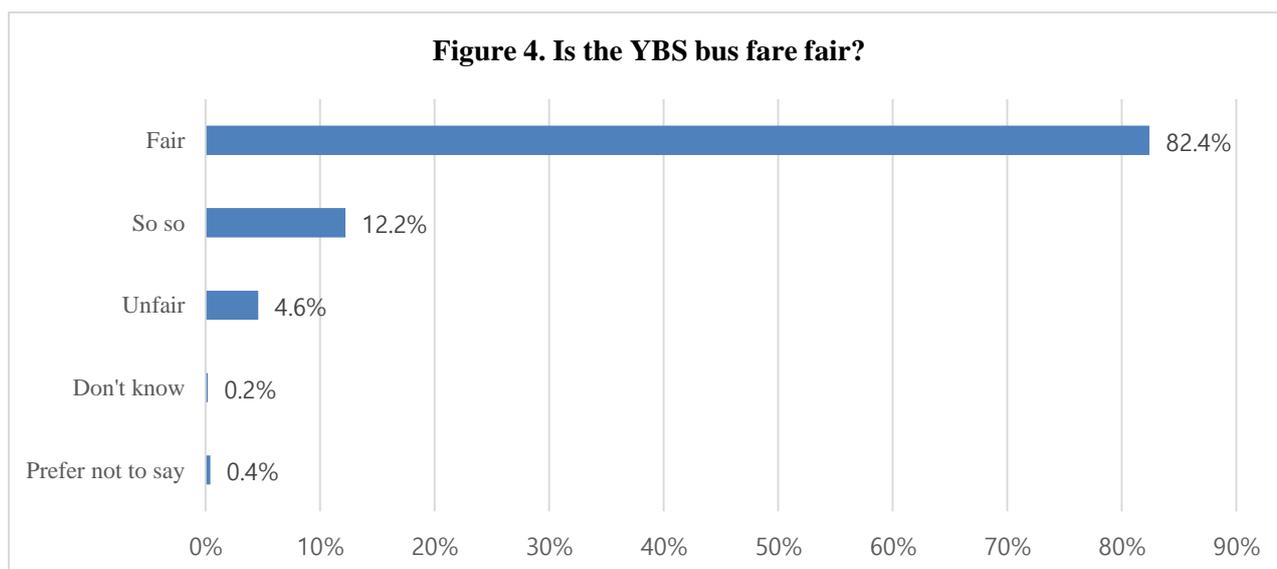
Respondents were asked whether YBS is an improvement over the Ma Hta Tha Bus System, and given a range of numbers between one and five to rate their responses. Five indicated a huge improvement and one indicated no improvement. The average response given was four.

Figure 3: Is YBS better than Ma Hta Tha?



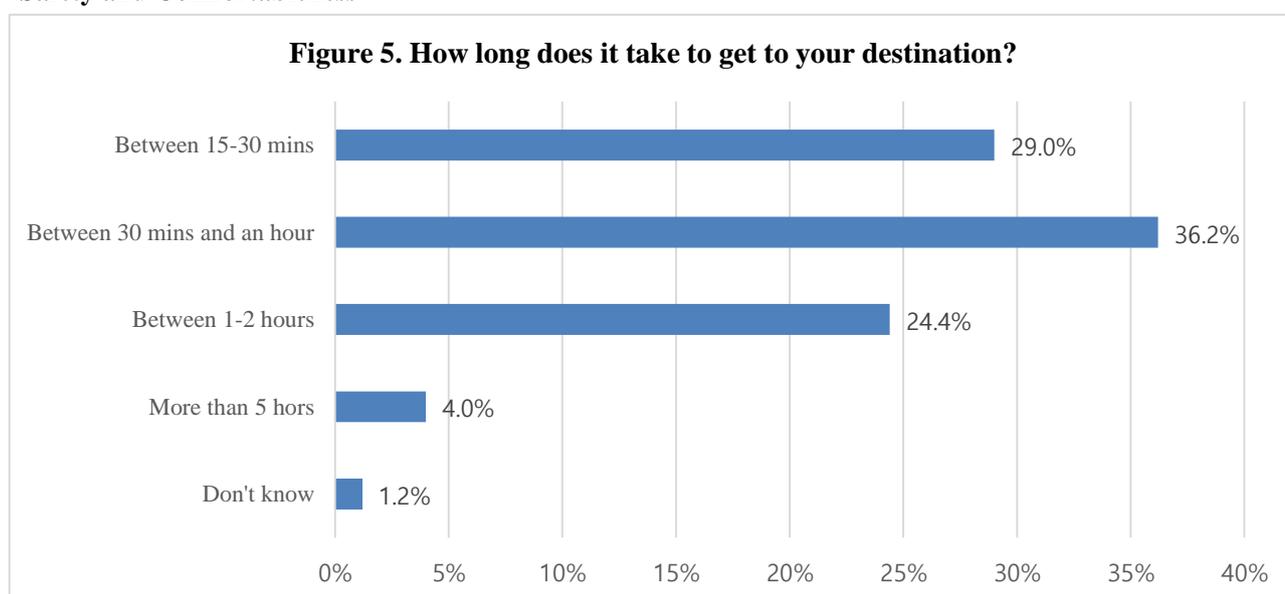
Most of the survey respondents assume that the bus fare is fair.

YSPS also asked to respondents whether they think YBS bus fare is fair or not. It turns out that 82.4 percent of respondents think it is fair and only 4.6 percent of them think it is not. 12.2 percent of respondents answered moderately (So so).

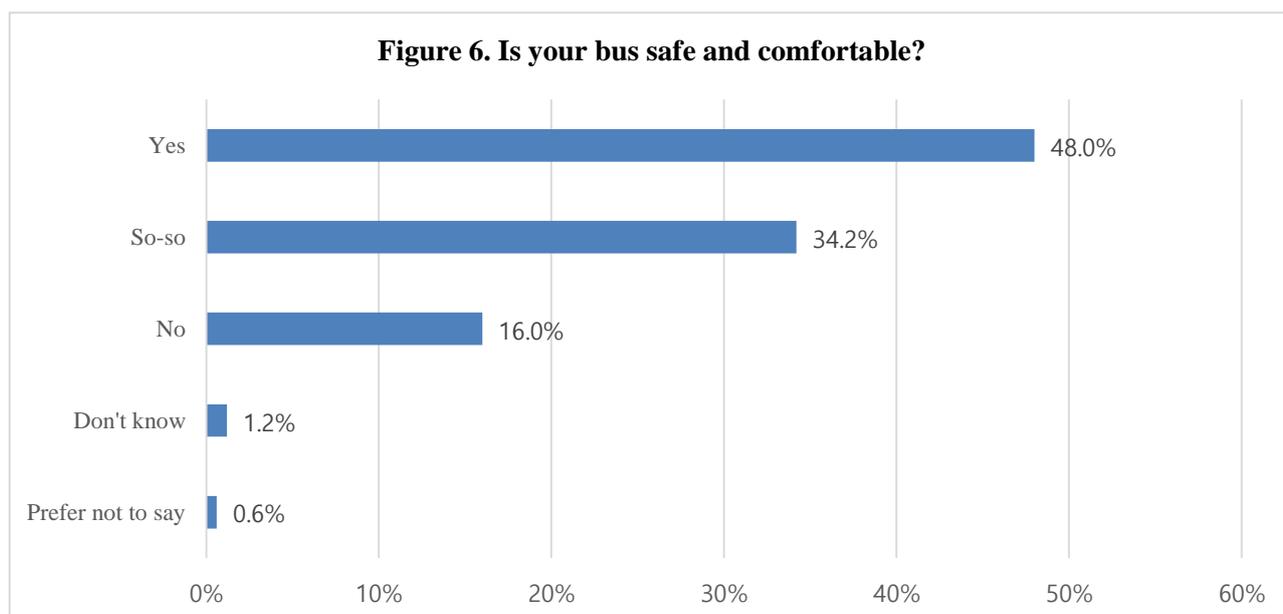


Another question is related to the time spent on bus to get to the destination. In asking this question, there are three groups that are ahead of other groups obviously in numbers. The first group answered that it takes from fifteen to thirty minutes to get to the destination. 29 percent of total respondents answered like this. 36.2 percent of respondents, the highest percentage of all groups answered that it takes from half an hour to an hour. And 24.4 percent of respondents answered that the bus takes from an hour to two hours to get to where they want.

Safety and Comfortableness



The safety of the people on bus is very important. Safety and comfortableness of commuters while taking the bus are the standards to be valued. When YSPS conducted survey on these matters, 48 percent of answerers responded that they feel safe and comfortable. 34.2 percent of respondents did not choose clear answers and responds only “so so”. 16 percent of total respondents answered that there is no safety and comfortableness on bus.



Another question is about using electronic payment cards as an alternative to pay for bus fees. There are 45.6 percent of respondents who answer card system is good and 26.6 percent who answer it is very good. Therefore, the majority of commuters want a system change. 6 percent of respondents answer card system is not good at all and 6.6 percent answered it is not good. So, only few people do not want a change.

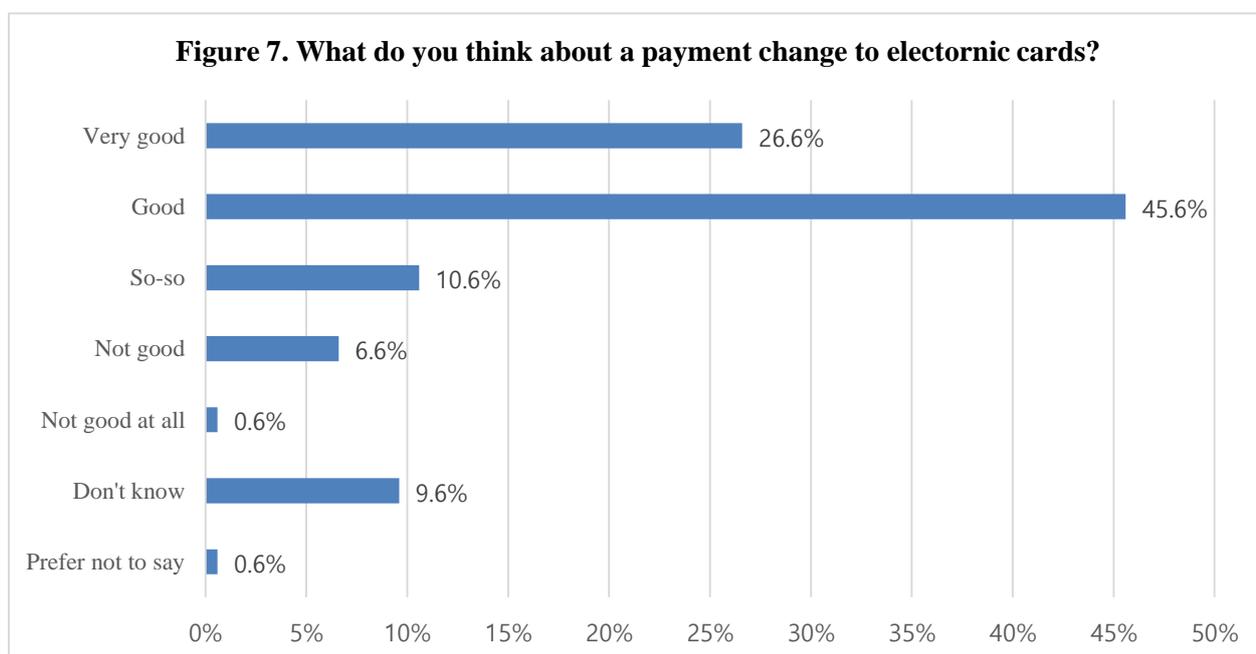


Figure 8. Population Distribution by Respondent's Age

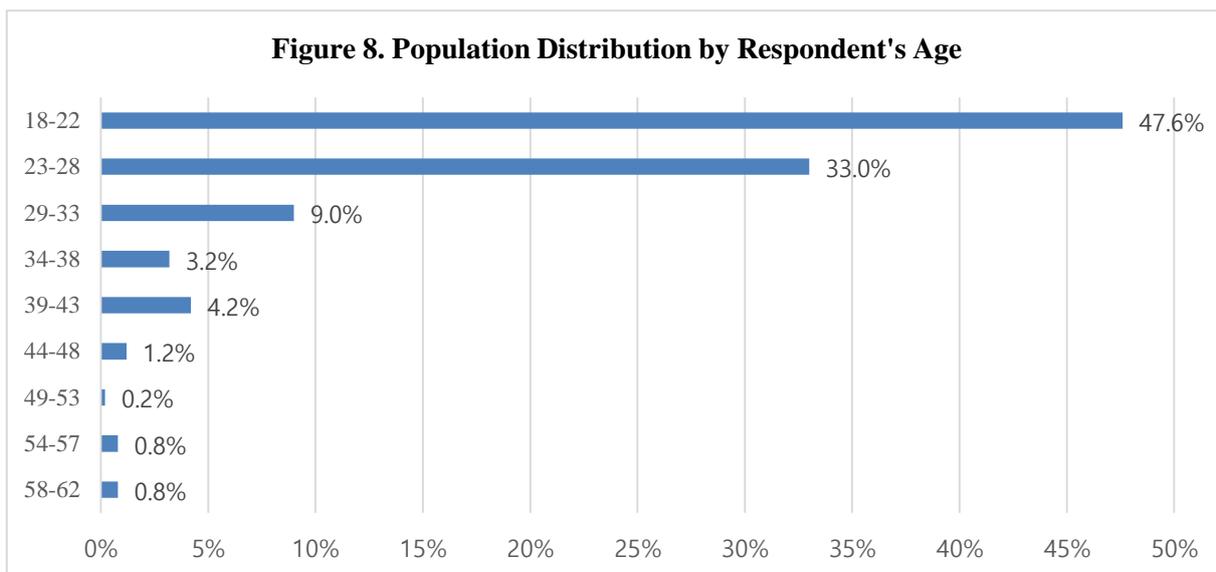


Figure 9. Population Distribution by Respondent's Gender

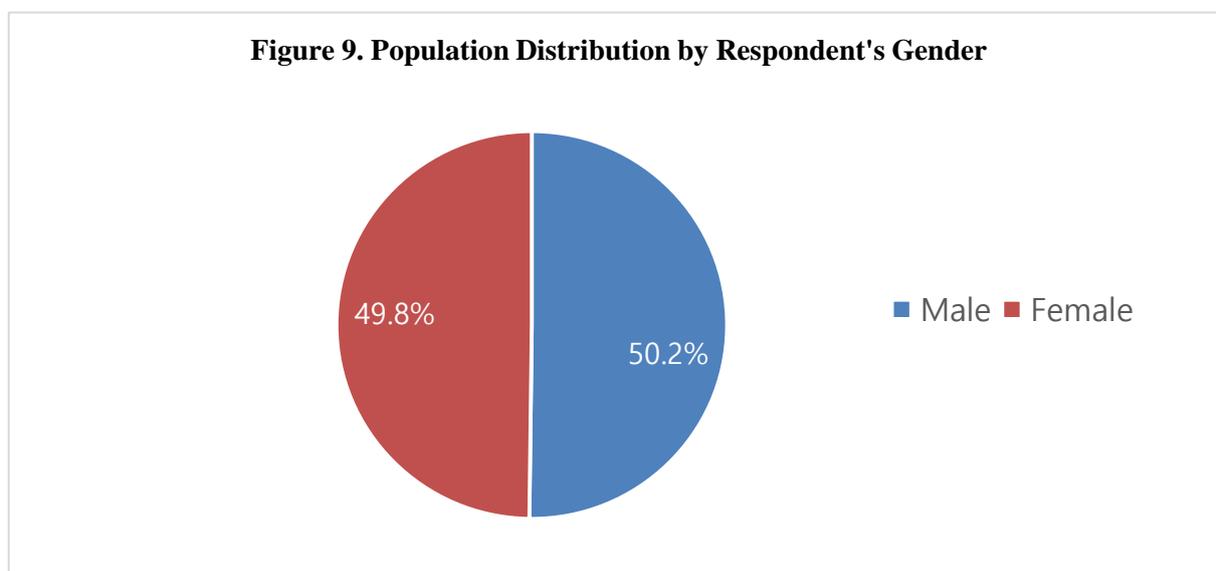


Figure 10. Population Distribution by Respondent's Profession

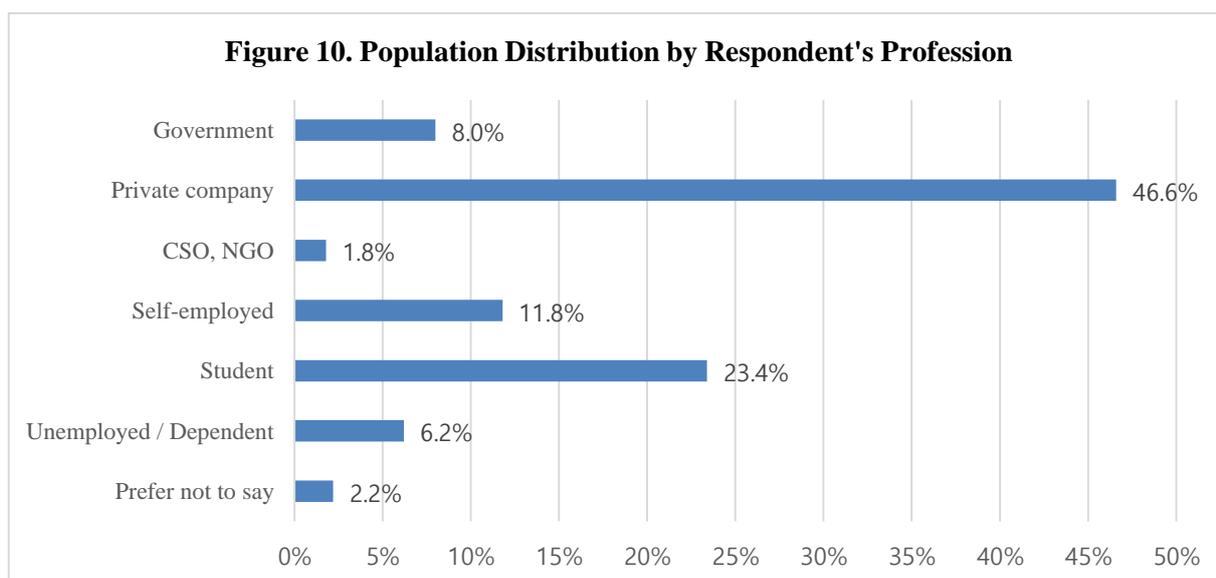


Table 1. Survey Description

Category	Description
Gender	Male 50.2% Female 49.8%
Age	18-22 47.6% 23-28 33.0% 29-33 9.0% 34-38 3.2% 39-43 4.2% 44-48 1.2% 49-53 0.2% 54-57 0.8% 58-62 0.8%
Profession	Government 8.0% Private company 46.6% CSO, NGO 1.8% Self-employed 11.8% Student 23.4% Unemployed / Dependent 6.2% Prefer not to say 2.2%

IV. Recommendations on YBS System

Although the new system received a good public opinion according to the results of “survey on the public opinion on YBS” conducted by Yangon School of Political Science, separate meetings with the YBS companies, drivers, MPs and other research findings proved that YBS still is away from achieving original objectives and faces many challenges. A comprehensive review is required for the transformation of YBS to overcome these challenges. In such a review, there should be multi-sector meetings which cover bus companies, private owners, drivers, bus line supervisors, MPs, and traffic police officials for deliberate problem solving. It seems that the problems in the implementation process arose because the YRTA’s agendas for the transformation to YBS are not based on the results of those multi-stakeholders workshops. Therefore, only if all those stakeholders are included in the policy review process of YBS, the all-inclusive program decisions can be produced and hence succeed in implementation.

YRTA should copy the reform of Seoul Bus System and Tai Chun Bus System. Before the Seoul Bus Reform, The mayor of it studied the problems and conducted a public policy research. After two years, his research report was publicized and the new system was based on its findings and got lessons learned. And also Taichun government allowed all the stake holders of Taichun Bus transportation to participate in the discussions for the reform. So their reforms were successful in a very short time and all stake holders followed the reform schemes.

Another lesson from their reform is that the Seoul government gave incentive to bus owners and drivers for their better services. So YRTA should create some incentives to bus owners for investing in public companies like reducing their income tax and bus drivers for better service like giving bonus.

The government should anticipate how private owned buses ought to be replaced and improved for better bus services. Improvement of bus services could hurt the owners of low quality buses as their business shall be stopped. The government should consider how to compensate them.

Conductors are the most damaged groups with the transformation of YBS. The problem of unemployment of them shall be considered since they will be removed when new bus lines are started. Another problem for better bus service is the traffic jam and that passengers are stuck on the bus for a long time to get to their destination. This problem can only be solved with the cooperation of traffic police, municipal and Yangon residents but YRTA alone. Yangon Regional government should specify the routes for buses, private cars and taxis, and displace the street shops, then remove the vehicles from where is not a parking to address traffic jam. Besides, the government should advocate people, hold public discussion on solving traffic jam and punish vehicles do not comply the rules.

V. Conclusion

As a conclusion YBS improve the bus service at some level though it encounter a lot of challenges. To address a remaining problem to abolish private bus lines and transform into public bus system, all stake holders should understand the problems and have a willingness to change. Therefore, we recommend that YRTA alone is not enough to address it and Yangon government should monitor and implement completely upon it. YSPS conducted a small public opinion survey on transformation of Ma Hta Tha Bus System to YBS. In doing so, we could not conduct possible standard survey but just survey only on availability and willingness of respondents because of limitations on money and human resources. The results show that most of the respondents have very positive opinions on YBS system along with some facts that should be taken care. YSPS would like to conduct annually more systematic surveys to find better solutions and recommendations solving problems and difficulties people encounter to help make progress on public transportation which is very important for rapid urbanization. ■

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