

## POLITICAL PATRONAGE IN ELECTION: IMPACTS OF THE COALITION CHANGE IN MALAYSIAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ON SARAWAK'S POLITICS

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, after the Malaysian 14th general election, the political realignment prompted the federal government to change its alliance from *Barisan Nasional* (BN) to another coalition named *Pakatan Harapan* (PH). However, PH's government only managed to serve for less than two years as the federal government when another political realignment happened again in early 2020, leading to the government's fall to the new *Perikatan Nasional* (PN) coalition. Malaysia, which practised federalism, faces a challenge because of the federal government's ongoing political turmoil. Sarawak has openly challenged the federal government over the last decade because of its decisiveness in national politics. After Malaysia's 14th general election in 2018, Sarawak became an opposition state for the first time, forming a new *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition called *Gabungan Parti Sarawak* (GPS). Despite various controversial issues such as the 1Malaysia Development Berhad scandal (1MDB), Malaysian Agreement 1963 (MA63), and oil and gas royalties used by opposition parties during campaigning periods, the *Barisan Nasional* political party remains strong, especially in Sarawak's rural areas. However, a sudden political realignment in the federal government will be very interesting to Malaysian politics, particularly in Sarawak, where the state election is scheduled for 2022.

Malaysia has been using patronage to gain votes during elections for more than a decade. Various programs and projects are distributed to voters by contesting parties. Parties' linkages to voters and party supporters have become stronger since 1990 because the opposition's transformational objectives have become increasingly convincing and realistic. Especially the opposition party victories in state elections and the relatively successful governments in Selangor and Penang since 2008 – including their abilities to distribute patronage– have strengthened ties and heightened "reification" in the minds of voters and supporters. (Ufen, 2020). In Sarawak and Sabah, the political scene is a little different, voters primary concerns are still on a basic level as development has yet to reach all parts of the state. This was supported by Hazis (2009), who argues that the practice of electoral patronage has become an integral part of the politics of development in Sarawak. Meanwhile in Sabah, the indigenous people have traditionally been strong supporters of *Barisan Nasional* and have consistently voted the former ruling coalition to power to cater to their developmental needs and cultivate strong patronage ties with bumiputra leaders' groups in rural areas (Bagang & Puyok, 2019).

In general, Malaysian politics is based on patronage and lets the political elites stay in power. Previous studies on political patronage focus on the grassroots levels' patron-client relationships between politicians and voters; however, there is limited study on political patronage at the elite level between state leaders and federal leaders. Hence, this study aims to

look at another layer of the patron-client relationship: the elite level (federal and state political elites) and how the change in federal politics reconfigure the interactions between the patrons and clients at the state level. This study will analyze whether the federal-level changes will affect Sarawak's political landscape, especially on federal-state relations under the new PN government. This study also seeks to examine the effects of coalition government administration in a Malaysian context.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Political Patronage**

Political patronage in the vocabulary of political science has a kind of 'folk' meaning. That is, patronage refers to how to party politicians distribute public jobs or special favors in exchange for electoral support" (Weingrod, 1968). Patronage is used in both the anthropological and the political science sense. In politics, patronage is "an incentive system — a political currency with which to 'purchase' political activity and political responses. (Sorauf, 1956).

In Afghanistan, patronage is a serious problem of the Afghan government and it is also considered as the main factor that hinders development in the country and boosts the motivations for corruption. Unnecessary lengthy bureaucratic procedures also create an opportunity for a public official to demand a small number of bribes and speed up the process. (Wardak, 2019). However, according to Cahyati and Lopo. (2019), patronage remains an effective means for local politicians to gain power and become important political actors. Leading the lowest level of government, village chiefs are expected to establish paternalistic networks. Uniquely, their patronage is not simply derived from the practice at higher levels (i.e. in legislative and municipal elections), but rather maintained through the everyday interactions required to successfully lead the village government. Patronage ultimately leads to money politics, vote-buying, and the provision of club goods.

In another study in Indonesia, patronage distribution is central to Indonesian politics. This was supported by Fikri (2017), who indicates that patronage has become a central component of many campaign strategies. Patronage has taken diverse forms, including the provision of money to individual voters and the gifting of public goods to social groups and organizations. In discussing the continued practice of patronage in democratic systems, Shin (2015) has argued that patronage has been seen through two main paradigms. The first holds that patronage is driven by public demand, by poor voters promoting their interests. The second, meanwhile, view patronage through a supplied lens, arguing that—as few politicians offer pragmatic policies— voters are required to support politicians who employ paternalistic ones. uneducated voters are more likely to support patronage over policy, as they desire jobs, money, education, and healthcare.

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, parties in power have the advantage of using the full range of government machinery in their favour. Political leaders typically do so by allocating resources to constituents they identify as key to their electoral success. This is to impress upon voters that their well-being is contingent upon their loyalty to their political leaders. According to Rahman, (2020), such patronage politics have long defined Malaysian politics. In the BN's 61 years in power, this was generally an effective strategy to secure votes and win elections. It is not surprising that PH and Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan) utilized the same approach during the recent by-elections. Even though PH and Warisan allocated millions of ringgit across all

five by-elections, patronage politics failed — in some cases spectacularly. Does this signal an end to patronage as an election tool? Far from it. Malaysian politics is culturally feudal. The practice of co-opting loyalty through patronage is well entrenched. But these trends suggest that patronage politics cannot entirely compensate for a government's lackluster performance. This is precisely the issue BN faced in the 2018 general election, which is lost. Another study done by Aspinall (2014), identifies three varieties of patronage: first (and ubiquitous) category is collective gifts, the second category comprises small "getting-to-know-you" gifts that candidates or brokers give individual voters when they first meet— tokens and memorabilia (key rings, calendars, or T-shirts) bearing the party logo and the candidate's image, or objects that evoke some sort of emotional or religious meaning (headscarves, prayer mats, prayer robes, prayer books, Korans, or Bibles).and lastly third category, though in practice difficult to distinguish, is vote buying—dispensing cash to individual voters as an incentive to cast their ballots for a particular candidate. Each strategy comes with risks.

## 2.2 Patron-Client Relationship

The patron-client relationship-an exchange relationship between roles-may be defined as a special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron (Scott, 1972). In the first place, by highlighting the various ways in which smallness reinforces the likelihood of clientelistic exchanges between citizens and politicians, the analysis has foregrounded state size as a variable mediating the emergence and persistence of patron-client linkages. While contemporary studies of clientelism struggle to explain why clientelistic politics emerge in some countries, not others, the present analysis suggests that state size should be considered a potential explanatory variable. The strongest evidence of a link between state size and clientelism is the observation that clientelism in small societies functions in markedly different ways compared to the larger states that continue to dominate the literature (Veenendaal, 2019).

Next, patron-client relations have long been an integral part of Chinese politics, with their historical roots dating back to the imperial demerge that there are several ways by which patron-client ties can enhance, rather than weaken, the performance incentives of government agents. First, patronage ties can strengthen agents' performance incentives by increasing the credibility of rewards from their principals. Moreover, patronage ties can sometimes generate direct pressure on clients to perform when their patrons demand good performance for political or policy reasons. To maintain a long-term relationship with their patrons, clients constantly need to demonstrate their worthiness and loyalty through various means. These include not only attending to patrons' private interests but also helping them to achieve important political and policy goals (Jiang, 2018). In a patronage democracy, the political leadership is tied to society primarily through the distribution of material resources through intermediaries called brokers. Patronage parties depend on a network, or pyramid, of brokers to mediate between the state and the people. (Kenny,2017).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study will use a qualitative method to investigate the impacts of the coalition change in Malaysia's federal government on Sarawak's political patronage. The use of qualitative techniques can provide a variety of advantages as one of the greatest strengths of qualitative methods is that they have the potential to generate rich descriptions of the participants' thought processes and tend to focus on reasons "why" a phenomenon has occurred (Creswell, 2003). Thus, this study's qualitative component involves undertaking in-depth interviews with ten to fifteen respondents (political elites) from various political parties in Sarawak to investigate the participants' views on patron-client relations between federal and state after coalition change in the federal government. The interview protocol covering mainly only political patronage between Federal and Sarawak political elites. Meanwhile, secondary data is gathered from articles, electronic books, journals, and other published media. This study employs online research to gain relevant information to gauge obtaining data based on electronic journals, research reviews, theses, and reference books.

This study will employ a purposive sampling method to select the participants. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Lastly, the data collected from an in-depth interview is analyzed through Nvivo version 12. The NVivo 12 program was used for analysis, a simple software package for encoding themed data. The in-depth interview sessions will be recorded and transcribed. The textual data containing interview transcriptions with the political elites will be coded into themes, later saved in respective nodes in NVivo. This study's themes are political patronage, political elites, coalition change, political realignment, patron-client, and federal and state relations.

### 4. CONCLUSION

This research focuses on the impacts of coalition change in the federal government on Sarawak's political patronage, specifically between federal and state political elites. Political patronage between politicians and voters in politics is not a new phenomenon in modern democratic nations. In essence, Malaysian politics is based on patronage and lets the political elites stay in power. Besides, patronage politics is also a key topic in Sarawak's research on political development. However, patronage studies give a lot of focus on patron-client relationships at the grassroots levels; interactions between the Members of Parliament (MP) and State Assemblymen (ADUN) with voters, party workers, and volunteers. This research will explore another layer of the patron-client relationships, which is the elite-level relationships between state and federal leaders. The Sarawak state faces a challenge due to the federal government's ongoing political instability, which may affect political patronage between federal and state political elites.

This study aims to generate new knowledge about coalition change's impacts on federal and state relations in Malaysia and how patronage politics impact federal and state political elites during general and state elections. The political parties and the politicians benefit from this study by considering the party's campaigning strategies and election manifesto, especially on the elite level's political patronage approach. Furthermore, it is hoped to develop theories based on the research findings and generate a new framework to investigate the research problem in a Malaysian setting. In terms of practice and policy development, this study can provide guidelines for Malaysia's federal and state governments to formulate better act and

regulation and development policies for its citizens after any election. The federal government can also use this study's findings to strengthen Malaysia's federation system by seriously considering federal and state relations issues between Peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak, and Sabah state governments. It primarily refers to the prominent issues about the Malaysian Agreement 1963, equal distribution of wealth, and other federal and state matters stated in the Malaysian federal constitution.

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