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Asymmetrical Federalism and Anti-Federal Sentiment in Malaysia: The Sabah Experience

Mohammad Azziyadi Ismail* & Mohammad Agus Yusoff

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: azziyadi@gmail.com

Abstract: Federalism is a system of fair and orderly power sharing between the state and federal governments. However, in the case of the Federation of Malaysia, this division is unbalanced and asymmetrical, owing to the fact that Sabah and Sarawak have been given more privileges than other states in Malaya as a condition to join the Federation of Malaysia during its formation on 16 September 1963. These terms were proposed by the Intergovernmental Committee and included in the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), which was signed on July 9, 1963, in London by the United Kingdom, the Federation of Malaya (Malaya), North Borneo (Sabah), Sarawak, and Singapore. Despite the fact that MA63 and the 20-point Agreement grant Sabah unique privileges, the state has long struggled with federalism issues, giving rise to anti-federal sentiments. Using the concept of asymmetrical federalism as a tool of analysis, this study examines the issues of asymmetrical federalism responsible for the anti-federal sentiment in Sabah. Interviews were used to collect primary data, while sources including books, journals, newspapers and online news were mined for secondary data in this qualitative study. Oil royalties, unequal development between Sabah and the Peninsula, immigration and security threats, Sabah's regional status within Malaysia and Borneonisation were found to be the five main issues that prompted Sabahans to be dissatisfied with the implementation of asymmetrical federalism. The failure of the Sabah and federal governments to address these issues has contributed to the birth of anti-federal sentiment in Sabah.

Keywords: Asymmetrical Federalism, Anti-Federal, Malaysia Agreement 1963, Central Government, Sabah

Introduction

Federalism is a government system that divides power between the central and state governments with each being organised and independent from the other. Until now, it is not possible to ascertain the exact number of countries in the world that employed this system, but according to Yeoh (2019:4), it has been used by 24 out of 193 countries in the world. Although the percentage is only about 12.4% of the total number of countries in the world, most of the countries that are using it are large countries such as the United States, India, Russia, Germany, Brazil, Argentina, Australia, Spain and Mexico. This shows that 40% of the world's population uses the federation as their political system. Meanwhile, small countries such as Comoros, Saint Kitts and Nevis

also use the federalism system but differ in many respects either in terms of the number of regional/state units, the degree of centralisation of power, constitutional functions and the division of taxation powers (Parker, 2014).

According to the agreement signed in the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), Malaysia has given Sabah the right to autonomy over other states despite the federalism system used by the country where this power is usually under the authority of the central government (Ismail & Yusoff, 2021). The autonomy meant in the context of Sabah is an advantage from legal, political, economic and socio-cultural aspects based on the 20-point Agreement and MA63 that has been guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. Although asymmetrical in theory, Malaysian federalism lacks the beauty one might expect from the implementation perspective. Various issues arose in terms of implementation, which have dragged on for a long time without a complete solution.

These issues have triggered dissatisfaction among the people of Sabah towards the central government as they felt that the central government was marginalising them. Moreover, the issues that surfaced weakened the sense of unity between the federation and the states, giving rise to and fueling anti-federal sentiments among the people of Sabah. Accordingly, this article discusses the issues of asymmetrical federalism and its implementation in Sabah leading to the emergence of anti-federal sentiments among the people of Sabah.

Understanding The Concept of Asymmetrical and Anti-Federal Federalism

Symmetrical federalism is a system employed by federal countries that are homogenous in society. It is a successful system in the United States and Australia. According to Tarlton (1965: 867), symmetry is the opposite of asymmetrical, which represents “the level of conformity and commonality in the relations of each separate political unit of the system to both the system as a whole and to the other component units.” As for asymmetrical, Tarlton (1965: 869) states it as “the diversity among member states, that which is articulated politically through component units possessing varying degrees of autonomy and power.” The given definition of asymmetrical suggests the existence of a certain space that is not shared by the provinces together with the federal government.

While asymmetry can manifest itself in many forms in federalist states, its causes and severity can vary widely. Burgess (2006) listed five factors that could lead a country to adopt asymmetrical federalism, including (i) differences in political culture and local traditions, (ii) differences in social backgrounds, such as religion, language, and ethnic origin, (iii) the location of territorial borders, (iv) socioeconomic background factors, and (v) societal demographic trends. These factors are crucial in putting the constitution into effect so that each state's governance system is effective and responsive to local demands.

The description above shows that asymmetrical federalism is a national political system that manages the division of power between the state and central governments whose states have their own unique history, culture and customs. However, the implementation of this asymmetrical federalism system has weaknesses that eventually lead to the emergence of anti-federal sentiments of the people in the related regions. Anti-federalism refers to the rejection of unfair practices, policies, and actions implemented by the federal government by citizens or regions (Maiz & Losada, 2011). This was the impetus for the formation of anti-federal groups, whose members demanded the right to freedom and autonomy in their respective regions. Accordingly, this article identifies the weaknesses of the implementation of asymmetrical federalism that lead to the emergence of anti-federal sentiments and evaluates the impact of its implementation in Malaysia, particularly in the state of Sabah.

Past Studies on Asymmetrical Federalism

Asymmetrical federalism has been studied by many past scholars. The article "*The internal conflict in Spain: the case of Catalonia*" by Tzagkas (2018) looked at the causes of Catalonia's bid for independence from Spain. In the study, three factors were discovered to lead Catalonia to become a part of Spain that is no longer able to form a union with Spain. The bias of Madrid's central government toward the Catalonian people, customs and economy is the primary cause. The second factor is the role of political parties in Catalonia, which frequently play on this sentiment to rally the people and drive Catalonia's independence from Spain. This resulted in the population of Catalonia being divided into two groups, pro-remain and pro-secession. Those who are pro-remain stand on their argument that they have assimilated with the Spanish culture and state system, while the pro-secession group was resulted from the people's desire for more authority from Spain.

Finally, the third involves historical factors; in the past, Spain and Catalonia were two different regions ruled by their own kings. The people of Catalonia saw them as a greater empire than Spain and the unification of the two countries in the 15th century was only due to the marriage relationship between the royal families of Madrid and Barcelona. As a result, the people of Catalonia think that the Spanish government should give them more autonomous power to govern their own region and should give higher recognition to Catalonia. So, in the contemporary era, the community still clings to the primordial sentiments of the past that exceed the spirit of Spanish nationalism.

Tzagkas (2018) came to the conclusion that there are numerous attempts to oust Catalonia from Spain, whether through legal and constitutional means or direct action by the Catalan people. Among them was the Free Catalonia Movement led by Carles Puigdemont. However, after the Spanish Constitutional Court suspended Catalonia's declaration of independence on October 31, 2017, this movement ultimately fell apart.

Mintz (2019) examined Quebec's claim of secession from the Canadian Federation in his book "*Two different conflicts in federal systems: an application to Canada*". Quebec, a province located in the west of Canada, did not wish to remain with Canada since it was not satisfied with the central government in Ottawa in two main respects. First, he was not satisfied with the grip of federal power on his territory in terms of health, education, language and tax collection. Second, Quebec differs from other Canadian provinces in that the majority of its residents speak French and practice French customs making the bond to this historical factor resulting in them being more inclined toward the French identity. Consequently, the policy of assimilating Canadian culture with that of the people of Quebec caused unease among the people of Quebec, who felt discriminated against by the central government.

Mintz (2019) found that the Canadian government failed to curb this problem, resulting in a conflict of claims leading to a strained relationship between the central government and Quebec including Quebec's demands for autonomy in cultural, linguistic, educational, health and economic aspects. In addition, Mintz's also revealed significant differences between the provinces within the Canadian Federation. For instance, the province of Alberta had been given special privileges over other provinces when it comes to the power to manage tax collection, making the region possess a lot of revenue. Such factors are the causes of Quebec's desire to leave Canada.

In India, Webb (2012) in his book *Kashmir's right to secede* observed the claim of the Kashmir region to become an independent region from Indian subjugation. Kashmir is a region that has been contested by two countries, namely Pakistan and India since India was divided into two until the formation of Pakistan in 1947. Since the secession, the people of Kashmir have faced various pressures from New Delhi leading to human

rights violations. As a result of the excessive oppression of the central government, its people became anti-central and demanded to be an autonomous region free from the grasp of India.

Webb (2012) concluded that it would be difficult to fulfil the aspiration of the people of Kashmir to secede from India. This is because of New Delhi's tight grip, which has made it difficult for the people of Kashmir to implement secession legally through the keel of the law, leading to the existence of separatist movements that operate in a guerilla fashion to obtain their own autonomous government. Among the separatist groups are Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, Al-Badr and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen.

Since the formation of Malaysia, there have been numerous unresolved conflicts between the federal government and the states of Sabah and Sarawak. Consequently, studies in Malaysia are currently more focused on these two states. This change is a result of Sabah and Sarawak's demand that the central government implement the MA63 and the 20- and 18-point Agreements as accepted prior to the signing of the MA63.

Sinring and Govindasamy (2018) in their article *Sabah Sarawak Exit Malaysia (SSKM): the direction after GE-14* wrote about the xenophobic and anti-federal sentiments of the people of Sabah and Sarawak to leave the Malaysian Federation. The article stated that the main factor behind the emergence of this sentiment is the dissatisfaction among the people of Sabah and Sarawak with the failure of the federal government to protect their interests in the economy and development. In addition, the issue of poverty is also an important factor driving the SSKM movement to incite the people of Sabah and Sarawak to oppose the federation. They mentioned that this movement has succeeded in giving awareness to the inland communities of Sabah and Sarawak such as the Iban, Melanau and Bidayuh of Sarawak regarding their rights. Political parties such as STAR, PBS and Warisan also raised this issue as a basis in their fights. Indirectly, such campaigns give rise to anti-federal sentiments in rural communities against the central government. Nonetheless, Sinring and Govindasamy's analysis only evaluated this sentiment from the perspective of SSKM and the people, without examining other aspects such as the impact of this movement on Malaysian politics, a gap that will be filled by this article.

Salleh, Puyok and Bagang (2019) in their article entitled *Constitutional asymmetry in Malaysia: a case study of Sabah and Sarawak* oversaw the involvement of Sabah and Sarawak in the formation of Malaysia and MA63. They characterised Malaysian federalism as legalistic and asymmetric in terms of population size, territory, economy, political landscape and identity. This causes an unbalanced relationship between the states in the Federation. Sabah and Sarawak, for instance, have a special position in the Federation of Malaysia since they joined the federation through MA63, which gave them special provisions in Article 20/18 as well as fiscal autonomy. Despite having asymmetrical power with other states, in terms of economic and physical development, these two states lag behind other states. The dissatisfaction that emerged among the people of Sabah and Sarawak towards the federation in turn gave rise to anti-federal sentiment.

Although the above highlights are similar to the title of this article, which analyses the factors influencing anti-federal sentiment, previous studies did not employ the conceptual framework of asymmetrical federalism as an analytical tool and did not evaluate the impact of anti-federal sentiment on the federalism of a country. This article fills the gaps by discussing the implementation of asymmetric federalism and anti-federal sentiment in Malaysia, especially in the state of Sabah.

A Methodological Note

A qualitative design was chosen for this study as it allows for the exploration of facts as well as the interpretation of opinions about the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, as the focus of this article, it

examines the real context of influence, beliefs, attitudes and the relationship between the concept of asymmetrical federalism and anti-federal sentiments.

This article employed the concept of asymmetrical federalism as an analytical tool where data was taken from secondary and primary sources. Secondary sources include materials or documents that have been studied and have been published including books, journals, newspapers, brochures, department annual reports, blogs and websites. The advantage of this resource is that it provides preliminary information about the subject of a study.

Primary sources are documents that are unprocessed, unprinted, directly collected from the field, original and uninterpreted. Interviews with seven significant figures who are directly involved in national politics and administration served as the main source for this article. They were Mustapha Mohamed (Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Economy)), Maximus Ongkili (Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Sabah and Sarawak Affairs)), Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar (Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Legal and Parliament)), Mahdzir Khalid (Rural Development Minister), Md Salleh Md Said (Usukan Assemblyman and Former Minister of Information and Communications), Anwar Ibrahim (Member of Parliament for Port Dickson and Leader of the Opposition) and Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman (Member of Parliament for Muar, President of the MUDA Party and is a former Minister of Youth and Sports).

Results and Discussion

The inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak into the Federation of Malaysia was not an easy journey. Since the beginning, the proposal for the idea of Malaysia by Tunku Abdul Rahman has been opposed by these two states for fear that joining the federation will cause them to be subject to a new form of colonialism, from being under the British to the subjugation of Malaya (Roff, 1974; Yusoff, 2006).

However, after going through various discussions and polls made by the Cobbold Commission and after being satisfied with the protection of Sabah and Sarawak's privileges, freedoms and powers in the 20/18-point Agreement and MA63, these two states, together with Singapore, agreed to join the Federation of Malaysia in September 1963. From there, the constitution of the Federation of Malaysia was drafted by determining the jurisdiction between the two levels of government.

However, since the establishment of Malaysia in 1963 until now, the issue of Sabah's claim to their rights enshrined in MA63 has not yet been resolved. This dispute caused the emergence of anti-federal sentiments among the people and leaders of Sabah. This article discusses five main issues connected to the implementation of asymmetrical federalism in Sabah, all of which have contributed to the emergence of anti-federal sentiment: (1) oil royalty, (2) the imbalanced development between Sabah and the peninsula, (3) immigration and security threats, (4) Sabah's status as a region within Malaysia, and (5) Borneonisation. These are the five main issues underlying the anti-federal sentiment that emerged among the people of Sabah toward the federation, despite the emergence of other issues. As a result, this article restricts the discussion to these five points.

1. Oil royalty claim

Sabah and Sarawak are the two largest oil-producing states in Malaysia. According to the Energy Commission (2020), Sabah was the largest state producing crude oil in the year 2019 with 86,600 thousand barrels, followed by Peninsular Malaysia with 71,605 thousand barrels and then Sarawak with 64,345 thousand barrels. Sabah stated that they have the right to obtain oil royalties as guaranteed by the Federal Constitution under Article

112C(4) and Part V of the Tenth Schedule to the Constitution (sections 1 and 3) which provides for the following: Section 1: "Import duty and excise duty on petroleum products," and Section 3: "So long as the royalty levied by the State on any mineral chargeable with export duty other than tin (but including mineral oils) does not amount to 10 per cent ad valorem calculated as for export duty, export duty on that mineral or such part of the export duty as makes the total of royalty and duty on exported mineral up to 10 per cent ad valorem so calculated."

Sabah claimed that the current royalty rate of 5 per cent is different from the provision found in the constitution as the return is very small and does not commensurate with what is taken from their state revenue. Therefore, Sabah demanded a 20 per cent oil royalty from the federation. When the central government did not entertain this demand, the anti-federal groups continued to fuel the sentiment of the federal government plundering Sabah's treasures only to develop the peninsula while Sabah continues to be ignored. Among the examples of sentiments played on social media (Facebook) by the Sabah for Sabahan group (2020) are:

How much is the 5% royalty of Sabah oil?

Let's count

1 Barrel world market price = RM158

RM158 x 5% = RM7.9

For every 10 barrels, Petronas profit thousands of ringgit, while Sabah only gets RM79.

Recognising the discontent of the people of Sabah, the coalition of opposition parties Pakatan Harapan (PH) used this issue as political capital in its election campaign to win Sabah. At the 14th General Election in 2018, PH pledged a 20% royalty payment in their manifesto (Buku Harapan, 2018). On this offer, the people of Sabah chose Pakatan Harapan (PH) to rule their state and PH also succeeded in overthrowing the Barisan Nasional (BN) government that had been ruling the country since independence.

After taking over the reins of the country's government, it seemed that the process of giving the 20 per cent royalty was not as easy as expected. Azmin Ali, minister of economic affairs in the Prime Minister's Department stated two reasons for this difficulty. To begin, the calculation is based on gross profit rather than net profit, which violates the Petroleum Development Act of 1974. Modifying the Petroleum Development Act of 1974 is essential if a proposed 20% increase in petroleum royalties is to be implemented. Second, since Petronas funds a sizable portion of the national budget, satisfying Sabah's demands will have significant monetary implications for both the company and the country (Dewan Rakyat, 2018). In an interview with him, Mustapha Mohamed (2021), the Minister of the Economy following Azmin Ali, gave the same explanation.

The payment of 20 per cent of oil royalties to petroleum-producing states cannot be implemented as it would jeopardise the production sharing contract (PSC) involving the distribution of oil and gas production revenue, which has been in place since 1995. The federal government will receive 5 per cent of the revenue from each barrel, the state government will receive 5 per cent, the production cost will receive 70 per cent, and the remaining 20 per cent will be divided among Petronas, contractors and income tax. If the government pays a 20 per cent royalty to petroleum-producing states, it will not only violate the PSC but will also put a financial strain on the country's reserves.

Regardless of the federal government's justification, the people of Sabah believe that they have a right to the resources taken and that they should be returned to the state of Sabah at an appropriate rate to implement development projects in Sabah that are comparable to other states. The history of the enactment of the Petroleum Development Act 1974 (PDA) is a black spot for the people of Sabah for two reasons. First, with the implementation of the PDA, the central government will be able to control and administer all of the state's ocean resources that are more than three nautical miles from the coast. Second, the PDA completely took over Sabah's right to handle oil affairs, whereas before joining Malaysia, Shell and Esso companies had been operating for nearly a century in Sarawak, producing 80,000 barrels of oil per day and as much as 5,000 barrels per day in Sabah (The Edge, 2013). At the time, the state government handled all business with the concession company.

Seeing the backwardness in the development of Sabah compared to the peninsula, the people and leaders of Sabah woke up to voice their right to oil royalties in the hope that the development of their state could be implemented soon to be comparable to the peninsula. For them, the setback in Sabah should not happen as the state is the largest producer of petroleum and has the highest reserves in Malaysia. Sabah's crude oil reserves in 2018 were the highest at 1.637 billion barrels, followed by Peninsular Malaysia at 1.612 billion barrels, and Sarawak at 1.304 billion barrels (Malaysia Energy Statistics Handbook, 2020).

The dissatisfaction of the people of Sabah continued to grow towards the central government, which in turn gives rise to anti-federal sentiments. To address this sentiment, Md Salleh Md Said (2021) stated:

This royalty claim issue will only be resolved if both Federation-Sabah leaders have the political determination to return to the spirit of defending MA63 and the constitution. The Constitution has recognised the privileges in the 20-point Agreement for Sabah and this needs to be implemented properly. Regarding oil royalty, the resolution of this matter needs to be expedited. All parties need to be open-minded in making decisions for the sake of the future of the people of Sabah as well as the harmony of the relationship between the two parties. If Sabah develops, the benefits will also be felt by our country.

Furthermore, Md Salleh (2021) stated that the opinion stemmed from the fact that Malaysia is an asymmetrical federalist country in which Sabah and Sarawak have special treatment in certain areas, such as in the 20-point Agreement. Therefore, the central government must implement this right of autonomy to create a harmonious relationship between the two levels of government.

2. Imbalanced development between Sabah and the Peninsula

Before the establishment of Malaysia in 1963, the leaders of the Federation of Malaya had promised to bring development to Sabah and Sarawak. To ensure that this promise is kept, Sabah and Sarawak received a special federal financial grant to cover service and management costs. They can also levy their own sales tax, receive revenue from land, mines and forests, entertainment duties, fees for specific services provided by state departments, and revenue from local governments as well as water supply. Furthermore, Sabah and Sarawak have the authority to levy import and excise duties on petroleum products, export duties on logs and other forest products, as well as sales tax and port fees.

It is the constitutionally granted superiority of Sabah and Sarawak over the other states in Malaya that gives Malaysia its asymmetrical federalism. Despite having this advantage, its development is still lagging

until now causing the Sabahan people to be disappointed by the failure of the central government in developing Sabah. Md Salleh Md Said (2021) in an interview with him mentioned:

The development of Sabah is very slow; the difference is 20 years behind compared to the peninsula. If you look at basic infrastructure such as roads, clean water services and electricity supply, Sabah today is not much different from its position 20 years ago. Sabah is still at an old stage with no major progress to be seen. This causes the people of Sabah to see their privileges in the 20-point Agreement as meaningless.

Unfortunately, there is a truth behind the above statement. In terms of development, Sabah recorded the third lowest per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of RM25,326 compared to the national average of RM46,450 in 2019. In terms of the incidence of absolute poverty, the rate was 19.5 per cent in 2019, with the extreme poverty of 1.5 per cent and relative poverty of 14.7 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020a). It appears from these statistics that despite Sabah's relative independence from other states, the state's social and economic development is significantly lagging.

In terms of unemployment, data in 2019 recorded the unemployment rate in Sabah as much as 5.8 per cent with a labour force participation rate of 70.0 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020b). In terms of water supply, Sabah only has 84 water treatment plants, 22 of which have been identified as having severe problems and unable to supply water to the public (Astro Awani, 2021). Sabah also recorded the highest number of poor schools in Malaysia. In the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, the central government allocated RM1.25 billion to upgrade and rebuild 237 poor school buildings in Sabah (Daily News, 2020).

These data indicate that despite the privileges and special financial allocations from the federal government compared to other states in the peninsula, Sabah's development remains backwards. There are various basic facilities that need to be established and improved such as paved road facilities, schools, telecommunication network access, stable electricity supply and clean water supply. For instance, the quality of many roads in Sabah is at such a bad level that it endangers road users so much so that some people call it landmine roads.

Three main issues caused this development and socioeconomic imbalance. The first is the failure of the Sabah leadership to plan the development of the state. The argument that is always used is Sabah's unique and vast demographic and geographical position, where the people live scattered causing difficulties in planning development plans. This argument was rejected by the central government. For the central government, Sabah's leaders are responsible for the state's lack of development despite being granted considerable autonomy by the federal government for this purpose. For example, Mahdzir Khalid (2021), the Minister of Rural Development in an interview with him stated:

The truth is that almost all large projects developed in Sabah are implemented by the Sabah Public Works Department (JKR) and contractors from Sabah. Instead of the federal government, SUK Sabah is in charge of running Sabah. The management of the Sabah government itself is to blame for a significant failure in Sabah's development. Everything is put into action by Sabah, and the federal government only allocates the funds.

The second factor is the failure of the entrusted contractors to complete the development project. These contractors are selected by the state government, not the central government. Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman (2021), former minister of youth and sports when interviewed stated that when he held the position of

minister, he also received reports related to the leakage of development allocations channelled by the central government to the state government. He said:

I travelled to Sabah to visit the stadium site that the federal government has long designated, so it surprised me to discover that there had been zero development on the project. Contrary to the peninsula, the land site is still vacant. If the project were to fail, at least piling poles would be present at the development site, but they aren't.

The third is the strained relationship between Sabah and the central government, especially when it is ruled by a party that is not aligned with the central government. The state of Sabah has historically been marginalised when the opposition has been in power. This occurred while the Sabah United Party ruled Sabah from 1985 to 1994. The majority of Sabah's privileges under the 20-point Agreement were violated, according to academic research, including the development allocations, Borneonisation, and identity card project (Loh, 1992; Luping, 1994; Yusoff, 2002, 2006). A similar party at the federal level later came to control the state government. The issue of development discrimination should not have come up again, but Sabah's development had not yet begun. So, the question still stands: what are the true causes of Sabah's backwardness? The central government claimed that Sabah's backwardness was caused by the state's weak governance, but the leaders and people of Sabah rejected this assumption.

For the leaders and people of Sabah, the setback was due to the discrimination of the central government that does not provide development provisions as contained in the 20-point Agreement. Additionally, Sabah's backwardness has been caused by the rejection of the central government in granting autonomy to the state as stated in Part VII Chapter 2, as well as Schedule 10 Part IV and V of the federal constitution.

This unbalanced development resulted in Sabahans being dissatisfied as they feel that the central government has failed to look after and preserve their welfare, especially in terms of economy and development. Subsequently, this matter served as a rallying cry for anti-federal groups including Sabah Sarawak Keluar Malaysia (SSKM), which aimed to encourage the people of Sabah and Sarawak to seek independence from the federation and establish their own country.

3. Immigration and security threats

Since colonial times, Sabah has relied heavily on migrant workers from other countries. Plantation companies like Felda, Sime Darby, and IOI Corporation have all come clean about the fact that more than 90 per cent of their workforce comprises immigrants (Dollah & Abdullah, 2018). This influx of immigrants has caused the people of Sabah to feel insecure due to the competition that existed in grabbing job opportunities. In addition, Sabahans were also forced to share public facilities such as hospitals, schools and public services with immigrants. With this competition, they feel that immigrants are usurping their privileges. This created an atmosphere as if the people of Sabah are isolated in their own state.

In addition, most of these immigrants live in slums and water villages that are very dirty with garbage and faeces that are thrown directly into the sea. Mulia (2009) stated that this situation has caused the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, cholera, syphilis, HIV and AIDS. Moreover, the influx of immigrants to Sabah also brought other social issues such as increased cases of prostitution, drug abuse and crime. Statistics of drug addicts in Sabah from 2016 to 2018 showed an increasing trend from 1044 cases to 1200 cases (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). The situation continued to get more complex when local people marry immigrants and even more complicated when they have children as a result of the marriage.

For the people of Sabah, this happened due to the diminishing of Sabah's authority in controlling the entrance to the state by the central government. Sabah is supposed to have control over who enters its territory, as stated in Article 6 of the 20-point Agreement: "Control over immigration into any part of Malaysia from outside should rest with the Central Government, but entry into North Borneo should also require the approval of the State Government." The Federal Government should not be able to veto the entry of persons into North Borneo for State Government purposes except on strictly security grounds. North Borneo should have unfettered control over the movements of persons other than those in Federal Government employ from other parts of Malaysia into North Borneo."

The argument of the people of Sabah is in line with the Immigration (Transitional Provision) Act 1963 enacted during the formation of Malaysia. This Act has detailed the scope of immigration control under the special privileges of Sabah and Sarawak, which covers the following: (i) immigration inspection of Malayan citizens who wish to enter Sabah and Sarawak; (ii) the use of passports for Malay citizens; and (iii) the authority of the governments of Sabah and Sarawak to deny Malayan citizens entry for any reason they see fit. Although Sarawak and Sabah residents are included in the citizens of Malaya, the entry of immigrants, including those from the Peninsular states, is controlled and limited as a result of this act to protect the interests of local residents.

Although the Sabah government has full autonomy to control all the entrances to its territory, this falls under the jurisdiction of the central government when it comes to security enforcement. This is because all the country's main security machinery such as the army, the Royal Malaysian Police, immigration and the prison department are under the supervision and direction of the federal government. Therefore, when there was an influx of illegal immigrants and also immigrants who were able to register as citizens through the issuance of fake identity cards, the people of Sabah became furious with the central government for failing to control and guarantee their safety. Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Sabah and Sarawak Affairs), Dr Maximus Ongkili in an interview with him stated:

The central government has many weaknesses in managing this. For instance, its actions to relax the entry requirements for Sabah, particularly by sea. Illegal immigrants can easily enter Sabah since there is no immigration control or inspection of passengers arriving by ferry and sea ship at Menumbok or the Kota Kinabalu ferry terminal, which is the gateway to Sabah from the island of the Federal Territory of Labuan.

Maximus Ongkili's statement about the weakness of the central government is in line with the Auditor General's Report (LKAN) Series 2 (2019) presented in the Dewan Rakyat, which revealed the weakness and inefficiency of the central government in managing the recruitment and employment of immigrant workers in Sabah. The report detected issues of inefficiency in the records of Exit Check Out Memos (COM) and the issuance of Temporary Employment Pass (PLKS), and intrusions into the Malaysian Immigration System (MyIMMs) operated by the Malaysian Immigration Department (JIM) in Sabah. For COMs, for example, JIM Sabah issued 24,880 COMs during that period, but only 14,481 immigrant workers who filled out COMs were recorded to have left Malaysia, while another 10,399 people had no record of leaving the country. The report also revealed that although the collection of revenue from the recruitment and employment of foreign workers in Sabah amounted to RM421.71 million during the period in question, as many as 1.5 per cent of the 1,911 foreign workers in Sabah failed the health examination to be approved and issued PLKS. Regarding the MyIMMs System, the report mentioned that 37 security stickers at JIM Sabah were forged in 2017 and 2019,

following the misuse of IDs and intrusions on the network (Report of the Auditor General 2019 Series 2, 2019).

This lack of control resulted in two outcomes. First, is the increase of immigrants entering Sabah, especially from the border of Indonesia and the southern Philippines. Second is the increase in piracy activities in Sabah waters threatening the safety of local people as well as tourism activities. For example, two local people were kidnapped by foreigners in Sandakan where the kidnappers used guns to take the local people away using a boat to the south of the Philippines (Astro Awani, 2015). Besides, there was an invasion of 235 Filipinos, some of whom were armed, who landed in Kg. Tanduo, Lahad Datu Sabah on February 11, 2013. The group, which called itself the Royal Security Force of the Sultanate of Sulu and North Borneo, was sent by Jamalul Kiram III who is one of the claimants to the throne of the Sultanate of Sulu. Kiram stated that their goal is to reclaim their territory in the eastern part of Sabah, which is still unresolved (Astro Awani, 2014). Such a situation causes the people of Sabah to feel insecure since it affects their security and livelihood.

As a result of the federal government's inability or unwillingness to address Sabah's security and defence concerns, many residents of the state have become anti-federal. This is due to the fact that while the government of Sabah is responsible for regulating entry into the state, the federal government is ultimately responsible for maintaining public safety.

4. Status of Sabah as a region within Malaysia – Article 1(2)

The establishment of Malaysia as a result of MA63 confirmed that the agreement was founded on the idea of equal partners, meaning that each of the participating states has national status. Therefore, the understanding held when joining Malaysia in 1963 was Sabah as a country or region (Chin, 2019). However, on 27 August 1976, this position changed when the status of Sabah and Sarawak was lowered from a country to a state under Malaysia. Ironically, the proposed constitutional amendment 1(2) in 1976, which was debated for 2 days (July 12 and 13), was approved in parliament with the support of 130 members of the Dewan Rakyat and Hansard recorded no parliamentarians from Sarawak and Sabah opposing this proposal (Sarawak Voice, 2016). Commenting on why there was no opposition, Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar (2022) explained:

The leaders of Sabah and Sarawak in 1976 were still weak to oppose the proposal to amend Article 1(2) of the constitution. Their lack of courage can be attributed to the fact that they have experienced first-hand the resentment that results from openly opposing the centre and have learned from their mistakes. The ISA Act is one of the tools used to intimidate the Sabah government's opposition. Leaders from these states who oppose the federation have a long history of being arrested; for example, Tun Mustafa and Jeffery Kittingan.

Yusoff (2006) and Bala (2018) mentioned that the dispute over the 'state' status quo for Sabah and Sarawak was due to the difference in interpretation of the phrase 'joining' or 'forming in the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. The central leader stated that Sabah and Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaysia, while the leaders of Sabah and Sarawak insisted that they form the Federation of Malaysia together with Malaya and Singapore. As such, they claimed that the reason Article 1(2) of the Malaysian Constitution was changed from "nation" to "state" in 1976 was to degrade Sabah and Sarawak's status. In their view, four units or political entities with status quo 'country' or nation formed the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, instead of thirteen 'states' (without Singapore) or fourteen 'states' (including Singapore).

Feeling unsatisfied with the actions of the central government towards Sabah's position as stipulated in MA63 and the 20-point Agreement, anti-federal movements emerged in Sabah including the Sabah for Sabahans group, Sabah Sarawak Keluar Malaysia, Borneo's Plight in Malaysia Foundation (BOPIM) and United Borneo Front (UBF). These groups organised various programs to sensitise the people of Sabah to stand up and demand their right to autonomy. In order to raise this awareness, they used various provocative phrases such as "*MA63 Tidak Sah*," "*Hormati Perjanjian Malaysia, Kita Belum Setaraf*," "*Negara, Not Negeri, Status for Sabah*," and "*Black 16 September*" (Bala, 2018).

Therefore, the central government attempted to overcome the growing anti-federal sentiment among the people of Sabah. Pakatan Harapan (PH) took power in 2018 and immediately began mobilising efforts to fulfil its promise to return Sabah to its former status as a country (equal partner) in the 14th General Election (GE) manifesto. The former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, promised that the PH administration's implementation of MA63 would see Sabah and Sarawak reinstated to their former status as allies. He also stated the need to re-evaluate the implementation of MA63 in the spirit of camaraderie, mutual respect and a high tolerance attitude (Daily News, 2018).

Accordingly, Liew Vui Keong, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Law) asserted that the cabinet agreed to amend Article 1(2) of the Federal Constitution to make Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia partners for realising the implementation of MA63, which is the demand of Sabah and Sarawak (Astro Awani, 2019a). However, the PH government's wish could not be implemented as it failed to get the support of a two-thirds majority of members of the Dewan Rakyat when it was presented on 9 April 2019. The PH government lacked 10 votes to achieve the support of a two-thirds majority (Astro Awani, 2019b). This effort then stalled after the PH government fell after 22 months in power due to the Sheraton Move incident in February 2020. This incident refers to the actions of Azmin Ali along with 8 PKR MPs leaving PKR and supporting a new coalition known as the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government.

Entering the era of the Perikatan Nasional (PN) administration, efforts to restore this status sank with the Covid-19 pandemic that hit the country and the world. This pandemic saw the PN government declare a state of emergency throughout the country and suspend parliament from sitting. But at the end of his 17-month reign, the PN central government tried to negotiate and give rights to Sabah and Sarawak through the CSA (Confidence and Supply Agreement). However, this CSA offer was rejected by Sabah Heritage Party (Warisan), Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), United Sarawak Party and United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO) (Utusan Malaysia, 2021). According to Syed Saddiq (2021), the MUDA President who was interviewed, the reason for his rejection was that "I am not confident in the offer since it was made at the last moment when the PN government itself was on the verge of collapse."

When Ismail Sabri took over the government, he offered something to Sabah and Sarawak to ensure that his administration remains stable and that there are no more issues of party hopping that could affect his administration. The opposition has proposed a "Memorandum of Understanding (MoU): Transformation and Political Stability" to cool the political climate, thereby facilitating the resolution of the Covid-19 crisis and the restoration of economic stability and the quality of life for the affected population. The MoU offered was approved by the opposition party and signed on 13 September 2021. Among other things, this MoU contains an agreement to implement the demands of MA63, which is the right of Sabah and Sarawak. Commenting on the agreement of this MoU, Anwar Ibrahim (2021) in an interview with him stated:

The issues involving the central government of Sabah have been ongoing for a very long time. It is bad for the future of the country and could undermine our commitment to federalism. In light of this, one of the points emphasised by PH in this MOU is that MA63-related issues must be addressed immediately. Although this MOU is not a solution to all problems, it can at least give the Sabah government and the central government time to find a solution to the growing dissatisfaction.

The amendment to Article 1(2), which was finally made to strengthen the position of Sabah and Sarawak in the Federation of Malaysia, received the support of 200 Members of Parliament (MP) in the second reading and 199 votes in support during the split vote in the reading the third time, where more than two-thirds of the members of the Dewan Rakyat agreed (Daily News, 2021). The bill amends Article 1 of the Federal Constitution by adding Clause (2) to the Federal States, which includes:

- The states of Malaya namely Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Penang, Selangor and Terengganu; and
- Borneo States namely Sabah and Sarawak.

Furthermore, amendments were made to Clause 2 Article 160 of the Federal Constitution by including the definition of Malaysia Day and replacing the definition of the Federation in accordance with the spirit of the Malaysia Agreement dated 9 July 1963 and the agreement regarding Singapore's separation from Malaysia as an independent and sovereign nation dated 7 August 1965.

Answering the question of why the amendment to Article 1(2) of the Federal Constitution brought by the PH government in 2019 did not get the support of a two-thirds majority, Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar (2021) said that it was due to the short period for Members of Parliament to present their proposals. He said during that time, "Our goal was for the ordinance to also amend Article 160, but we only had 10 days before the second reading when the blueprint was presented in the Dewan Rakyat, so we were unable to present our own amendment, which required 14 days notice."

The question that arises is whether or not this amendment can solve all the issues that have been happening for a long time. The answer is that, while the constitutional amendment has been made, the primary issue that needs to be addressed is its implementation. If the centre fails to act as agreed, the anti-federal sentiment will continue to exist among the people of Sabah. The people of Sabah hope that with the return of the MA63 status, they will be given back the right to autonomy as promised before joining the Federation of Malaysia.

5. Borneonisation

Borneonisation is stated in Article 8 of the 20-point Agreement demanded by Sabah under MA63 as a condition for joining the Malaysian Federation. Article 8 states "Borneonisation of the public service should proceed as quickly as possible." This condition is Sabah's strategy to ensure that its people are given priority, particularly in their own state, when it comes to filling public service positions.

Bala (2018) stated that the federal government's willingness to carry out Borneonisation was expressed by Tunku Abdul Rahman in his speech on 16 October 1961 by inviting Sabah and Sarawak to join the Malaysian project. In his speech, Tunku stated:

...in our future constitutional arrangements, the Borneo people can have a big say in matters on which they feel very strongly, matters such as immigration, custom, Borneonisation, and control of their state's rights.

This matter was further reinforced in the Inter-Governmental Committee Report (IGC) (1962) where its Chairman Lord Lansdowne noted in Annex B that Borneonisation was done “...to reassure officers seconded or transferred to the federal public service, and to reassure officers in the states that Borneonisation will be given first priority in the federal department.”

This statement shows the commitment of the central government to carry out Borneonisation, particularly involving the highest public positions at the Sabah state level in return for their willingness to join Malaysia. The central government agreed that this commitment had been fulfilled. However, Maximus Ongkili (2022) stated that Borneonisation has not yet been implemented properly. He said that up until now, among the 109 federal department head positions in Sabah, 54 of them were filled by Sabahans, 39 from the Peninsular, and 2 people from Sarawak. This shows that only 49.5% of the quota of federal department heads are held by people born in Sabah. With this data, Maximus insisted that the promise of Borneonisation had not yet been properly implemented by the federation even after 59 years of Sabah joining Malaysia. He observed this as proof that the fertile anti-federal feelings of the people of Sabah are the result of the failure to implement a major agreement in the country's history. Maximus (2022) again mentioned:

The people of Sabah feel that Borneonisation was deliberately missed or forgotten by the federation and ultimately contributed to Sabah's backwardness. With that, I am of the opinion that the struggle to bring progress to the state of Sabah can only be well understood and implemented by the people of Sabah.

Maximus' view is also supported by Md Salleh Md Said (2021). In an interview with him, he asserted:

Borneonisation must be practised as stipulated in MA63 by involving qualified Sabah citizens in every ministry, department and agency of the federal government. They need to be given priority as there are still positions dominated by officers from the Peninsula. Now, Sabah has a large number of civil servants who are highly qualified and skilled in various fields. Since Sabah is one of Malaysia's largest states, its top civil servants' involvement and perspectives are crucial to developing and implementing effective state and national policies.

Despite the opinions of the two Sabah leaders quoted above, data from the Ministry of Education and Health showed that Borneonisation is proceeding smoothly and successfully in the state. Out of a total of 40,101 teachers in the state, 11,915 (83.8%) are natives of Sabah, 295 (2.1%) are from Sarawak, and 1,990 (14.1%) are from the peninsula. This includes 25,900 primary school teachers and 14,201 secondary school teachers. Of these, 22,720 (87.6%) primary schools are filled by teachers from Sabah, 548 (2.1%) from Sarawak and 2,632 (10.3%) from the peninsula (Interview with an informant from the Ministry of Education who wishes to remain anonymous).

As for the Malaysian Ministry of Health (KKM) staff in Sabah, data shows that out of a total of 29,434 staff, 24,385 of them are Sabah-born, and 646 are from Sarawak. This indicates that 82% of MOH posts in Sabah are filled by Sabahans (Interview with an informant from the Ministry of Health who requests to remain anonymous).

Despite the fact that the data presented previously demonstrated that two ministries under the control of the central government have implemented Borneonisation, Sabah leaders continue to assert that the central government has not implemented Borneonisation. The results of the analysis found that Sabah leaders are

exploiting this issue as this is how they can show the people of Sabah that they are fighting for the rights of Sabah to gain support in the election. Second, the people and leaders of Sabah utilise this issue since they do not have real information. Since many in Sabah believe the federal government is not living up to its end of the bargain regarding the 20-point Agreement and Sabah's autonomy rights, the central government must provide regular updates on the progress of filling positions in the state. Without proper explanation and data, anti-federal sentiment will continue to grow in the souls of Sabahans as they think the federal government has denied Sabah's rights in the provision of Borneonisation.

Conclusion

Asymmetrical federalism is the approach taken by Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore to form the Federation of Malaysia. The purpose is to safeguard the rights and interests of the people of Sabah and Sarawak, especially the indigenous people so that they do not lag in terms of development compared to other states in Malaya. With this asymmetrical federalism, Sabah and Sarawak are given several privileges known as the 18 and 20-point Agreements. The results of the discussion have shown that the level of development in Sabah is still below the states in the peninsula despite the advantages given. This triggered dissatisfaction among the people of Sabah claiming that the central government had taken their state's revenue without returning it to their state in a proportionate way. In addition, the people of Sabah are also dissatisfied with the central government because they feel that the central government has not implemented the 20-point Agreement as agreed upon during the formation of Malaysia.

The central government's failure has caused the emergence of anti-federal groups in Sabah to demand their autonomy and separation from Malaysia. Therefore, the central government must fulfil all the rights allocated to Sabah as it is firmly bound by an agreement agreed by both parties. In addition, the results of the analysis also discovered that the central government is not the only one to blame for Sabah's underdevelopment. Given that the state government of Sabah is similarly inept at managing the state and is sometimes unaware of the true status of changes and developments made by the federal government, it is only fair that it shares responsibility for this issue. Furthermore, Sabah leaders are only using the central government's failure to show they are fighting for the people of Sabah to gain support ahead of the election.

This analysis concludes with five points. First, Sabah will not be able to solve all the issues facing it without the help and support of the central government. Sabah needs to accept the fact that it is the only state in Malaysia that has limited powers compared to the central government and is subject to the Federal Constitution. Second, Sabah must be more reasonable in its demands if it wants the central government to take its people seriously. Insisting on things that are outside the scope of the federal government's authority will lead to wasted time and energy on both sides. Third, efforts to bring Sabah to the same level of development as the peninsula must be unimpeded by differences in approach between the Sabah government and the central government. This is important because Sabah is the second largest state in Malaysia blessed with attractive natural beauty and great potential in boosting the tourism and agricultural industries. Fourth, the people need to be given clear information about the government's short-term and long-term direction planning. This is important so that they do not play with perceptions that ultimately lead to hatred and anti-federal sentiment. Fifth, to ensure federalism's continued vitality and the integrity of national sovereignty, the federal government must take firm action against any group that promotes anti-federal sentiments.

Acknowledgement: Authors wish to acknowledge the support of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) through the provision of two separate research grants (Code SK-2020-005 and SK-2020-015). The authors would also like to thank the people who were interviewed for their time and insight.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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