

Federal Bargains and Decentralised Competition: Ethnic Politics in Sarawak and West Kalimantan

Tawar-menawar Persekutuan dan Persaingan Terdesentralisasi: Politik Etnik di Sarawak dan Kalimantan Barat

TAUFIQ TANASALDY & SING PEI TAN*

Received: 28-5-2026/Accepted: 3-7-2026

ABSTRACT

This paper compares regional ethnic politics in Sarawak, Malaysia and Kalimantan, Indonesia, two historically and culturally linked border regions that have progressed under different state structures. Despite growing work on ethnic politics in Southeast Asia, there remains limited comparative analysis at the subnational level across national borders, particularly between these two regions. It examines how colonial legacies, nation-building strategies and centre-periphery relations shaped divergent patterns of ethnic mobilisation and accommodation, using a comparative historical institutional approach that draws on interviews, secondary sources, electoral trends and policy developments across key socio-political periods. The study argues that Sarawak's politics act within a constrained consociational framework under Malaysia's federal system, where elite bargaining and coalition politics enable representation while limiting autonomy. On the other hand, West Kalimantan reflects Indonesia's shifting diversity management, from early post-war representation to New Order centralisation, and later decentralised, competitive ethnic politics after Reformasi. Empirically, the analysis finds that Sarawak has sustained relatively stable multiethnic elite coalitions under federal constraints in Peninsular Malaysia, and West Kalimantan has experienced more volatile and competitive forms of ethnic mobilisation, particularly after decentralisation. By comparing these courses, the paper shows how similar social compositions create different outcomes under federal versus unitary arrangements. Empirically, it contributes to the subnational studies in Southeast Asia, and theoretically and in terms of policy, it underscores the importance of institutional design and centre-periphery relations in shaping the management of ethnic diversity beyond the national level.

Keywords: Ethnic politics; Sarawak; West Kalimantan; Regional politics; Subnational

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini membandingkan politik etnik serantau di Sarawak, Malaysia dan Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia, dua wilayah sempadan yang mempunyai hubungan sejarah dan budaya yang rapat tetapi berkembang di bawah struktur kenegaraan yang berbeza. Walaupun kajian tentang politik etnik di Asia Tenggara semakin meningkat, analisis perbandingan subnasional merentas sempadan negara masih terhad, khususnya antara kedua-dua wilayah ini. Makalah ini meneliti bagaimana warisan kolonial, strategi pembinaan negara dan hubungan pusat-pinggiran membentuk pola mobilisasi dan akomodasi etnik yang berbeza. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan institusional sejarah perbandingan, kajian ini berpandukan temu bual, sumber sekunder, trend pilihan raya dan perkembangan dasar merentasi beberapa tempoh sosio-politik utama. Kajian ini berhujah bahawa politik Sarawak beroperasi dalam kerangka konsosiasional yang terbatas di bawah sistem persekutuan Malaysia, di mana tawar-menawar elit dan politik gabungan membolehkan perwakilan, namun mengehadkan autonomi. Sebaliknya, Kalimantan Barat mencerminkan perubahan pendekatan Indonesia dalam mengurus kepelbagaian, daripada perwakilan awal pascaperang kepada pemusatan kuasa Orde Baru, dan seterusnya politik etnik yang lebih kompetitif selepas Reformasi. Analisis mendapati bahawa Sarawak mengekalkan gabungan elit pelbagai etnik yang relatif stabil di bawah kekangan persekutuan, manakala Kalimantan Barat mengalami mobilisasi etnik yang lebih tidak menentu, khususnya selepas desentralisasi. Perbandingan ini menunjukkan bahawa komposisi sosial yang serupa dapat menghasilkan hasil politik yang berbeza di bawah susunan persekutuan dan kesatuan, sekali gus menegaskan kepentingan reka bentuk institusi dan hubungan pusat-pinggiran dalam pengurusan kepelbagaian etnik.

Kata kunci: Politik etnik; Sarawak; Kalimantan Barat; Politik serantau; Subnasional

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic politics, the interaction between ethnic identities and political courses, has long created an important feature of societies marked by significant ethnic diversity, especially within plural society context. This is particularly noticeable in Southeast Asia countries, whereby Furnivall (1939) defined the plural society as containing two or more ethnic groups which live side by side, yet without mingling, within one political unit.

The role of ethnic politics in plural societies and its impacts for nation-building is the key to understand political landscape within the Southeast Asia. Upon gaining independence, nation-building efforts pursued to promote greater social integration, a trend visibly noticeable in both Malaysia and Indonesia. The plural societies in both countries are products of historical processes. The British and Dutch bringing in the large-scale migration from outside the region. In Malaya, Indian and Chinese migrants were brought in by the British colonial administration after the 1830s to work as labour in rubber plantation and tin mines respectively. For similar reasons, the Chinese were brought into the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia).

The interaction between ethnic groups within colonial regions became more and more distinct over time. Population movements across regional boundaries were further eased by several colonial policies, such as the Dutch *transmigratie* programme, which has successfully relocated substantial numbers of Javanese settlers to various parts of Sumatra in an effort to redistribute labour and alleviate demographic pressures on Java (Heeren, 1979).

It is common for people, particularly new migrants, to seek supportive communities in a foreign land, often forming homogenous neighbourhoods such as 'Chinatown' or 'Little India'. However, colonial policies also played a significant role in shaping and reinforcing these distinct enclaves. In Indonesia, for example, Dutch authorities at one point mandated that Chinese residents in certain parts of Java could not establish living quarters outside designated zones and restricted their movement beyond these boundaries (Dijk, 2002).

Similarly, in Malaya, the British administration adopted a divide-and-rule strategy to accentuate divisions among ethnic groups. Economic competition was minimised through the allocation of Malays, Chinese, and Indians to separate economic sectors. Malays were confined to rural villages and engaged primarily in small-scale agriculture and fishing; Chinese communities clustered around tin-mining towns; and Indians were placed in rubber plantations. This geographic and occupational segregation entrenched socio-economic disparities among the different ethnic groups.

The politics of the post-colonial period have been heavily influenced by this experience, leading to the institutionalisation of ethnic considerations in the formation of the political system. Mechanisms that can be put in place, as observed in both cases in this study, are ethnic quotas, affirmative action or consociational arrangements. Political actors in plural society may align themselves with specific ethnic groups to mobilise electoral support. While these strategies aim to ensure equal representation, however it could also contribute to ethnic divisions (Lijphart, 1977; Horowitz, 1985).

The divisions are mutually reinforcing, and due to a lack of integration, they have sown fear and distrust among different ethnic groups such as Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Dayaks in the case of Malaysia. Exclusive ethnic-based parties were established along these major groups to advance their respective interests. While there are Islamic parties, they effectively function as Malay parties, given that Malay identity is constitutionally linked to Islam. Multi-ethnic or cross-ethnic parties also exist, though their influence varies across regions. These parties tend to enjoy

relatively stronger support in the eastern Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak compared to the states in Peninsular Malaysia. Political parties in East Malaysia were once quite distinctive; however, they were eventually reshaped to align with the broader political constellation at the federal level.

In Indonesia, historical distrust among ethnic groups, deepened by divisions during the Dutch colonial period and inter-group competition, contributed to outbreaks of conflict in several regions after independence. Tensions between the central government and regional administrations were reflected in a series of rebellions during the 1950s. Until the late 1950s, numerous ethnic and regional (parochial) parties operated across the archipelago. Following the enactment of Presidential Decree No. 7 of 1959, regional and ethnic parties were effectively compelled to merge into national political parties. Over time, regional sentiments were gradually co-opted to support the central government's nation-building agenda, a development that resembles the Malaysian experience. Nevertheless, unlike in Malaysia, ethnic and regional parties disappeared entirely from Indonesian politics except Aceh, which retained regional parties under its peace agreement. Religious political parties continued to operate in various forms and under different names, although in recent decades all viable religious parties have been Muslim-based. Other religious parties, representing considerably smaller constituencies, have struggled to gain a meaningful foothold. Although some have participated in general elections, none have succeeded in winning parliamentary seats since 2009.

Both countries have experienced, to varying degrees at national or regional level, what is conceptualised as consociational democracy. This model rests on elite-level cooperation, whereby political elites from different ethnic communities negotiate power-sharing arrangements and form grand coalition governments to manage societal divisions. Consociationalism posits that institutional design plays a critical role in structuring political behaviour by shaping the identity categories around which political mobilisation occurs. It is typically characterised by several key features: the inclusion of all significant ethnic groups in grand coalition governments; proportional representation in legislatures, public offices, and the civil service; segmental autonomy that allows groups limited self-governance in matters of particular concern; and mutual veto powers to protect vital group interests (Lijphart, 1977; Reilly 2006, 815).

This paper argues that while ethnic-based political mobilisation and consociational practices have been formally institutionalised and have demonstrated considerable endurance in Malaysia, comparable developments in Indonesia have been brief, uneven, and sporadically manifested in the country's modern political history. The study focuses on Sarawak in Malaysia and West Kalimantan in Indonesia in order to explain the historical, institutional and regional forces that have shaped their different post-colonial courses of ethnic politics. This study constitutes the first systematic comparative examination of the sociopolitical evolution of two peripheral regions that share geographical proximity and exhibit significant demographic and cultural affinities, yet have been separated by state boundaries that are themselves products of the colonial legacy.

To assist with the analysis, understanding of ethnic demography in Sarawak and West Kalimantan is crucial. In Sarawak, the Iban is the largest ethnic group with a population of 723,400 (or 25.7%) out of the state population of 2.813 million in 2022. Population statistics for the other ethnic groups are as follows: Chinese (619,900 or 22.04%), Malay (607,800 or 21.61%), Bidayuh (197,000 or 7.00%), Melanau (133,400 or 4.74%), and Other Indigenous (141,200 or 5.02%) (Economic Planning Unit, Sarawak, 2022). Unfortunately, the authors could not locate past data as earlier population estimates are inconsistent due to boundary changes and uneven data quality.

Such a picture, however, is more readily available in the case of West Kalimantan due to the more consistent and systematic nature of Dutch colonial record-keeping in the region. In the early post-independence period, the three dominant ethnic groups in this region were the Dayaks, Malays, and Chinese. Unlike Sarawak, where indigenous groups are politically more fragmented, non-Moslem indigenous communities in West Kalimantan have mobilised around the broader and more inclusive category of “Dayak” as a potent and unifying identifier in ethnic politics, particularly in relation to other ethnic groups. Over subsequent decades, the Javanese and Madurese populations grew significantly, driven by internal migration policies and economic opportunities. According to the 2000 census, the largest ethnic groups were Dayaks and Malays, followed by Javanese, Chinese, Madurese, and Buginese. Significant numbers of Malays, particularly those in the hinterland, were Dayak who converted to Islam, and therefore, became Malay, following the local sociocultural practice, known as *masuk Melayu*.

TABLE 1. Ethnic Population in West Kalimantan (in percentage)

Ethnicity	1930	1971	2000
Dayaks	48.9	41	30.0
Malays	28.5	39	34.7
Javanese	1.2	2	10.4
Chinese	13.5	12	9.5
Madurese	0.8	0.6	5.5
Bugis	6.6	5	3.2

Source: Tanasaldy (2012, p.50).

The research in this paper is presented in a manner that reflects its methodological approach, adopting a comparative historical institutional framework that draws on interviews, secondary sources, electoral trends, and policy developments across key political periods. It also acknowledges key methodological limitations, such as uneven data availability, given that the paper examines two politically separate regions with distinct historical and political trajectories; therefore, any generalisations should be interpreted with these considerations in mind.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

ETHNIC POLICIES IN THE COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION

The British colonial period in Malaya witnessed the implementation of ethnic policies that significantly shaped the demographic and social structures. The British colonial administration encouraged large-scale of migration to Malaya to support the burgeoning plantation and mining industries in early 1900s. Chinese migrants fluxed in to work at tin mines while Indian labourer were brought in for rubber plantations. On the other hand, the Malays were predominantly engaged in subsistence agriculture (Esman, 1994; Jomo, 1986).

This divide-and-rule strategy aimed to minimise interaction among the ethnic groups, by establishing different schools’ system, residential areas, and economic roles for Malays, Chinese and Indians. This ethnic compartmentalisation reinforced social and economic inequalities and sowed the seeds of interethnic tensions that persisted into the post-independence era (Hirschman, 1986).

Sarawak’s colonial ethnic policies were distinct due to its unique demographic and political landscape. Prior to 1841, Sarawak was part of the north Bornean territory under the rule of the

Sultan of Brunei. In 1841, British cavalry officer, James Brooke assisted the Sultan in quelling a rebellion in the western region of the territory. As a reward, he was granted the title of Raja of Sarawak. Under the Brooke dynasty (1841 -1946), a paternalistic approach was adopted as guardian of indigenous communities' rights, including the Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu (as mentioned earlier, these non-Moslems natives were grouped as Dayak in the Indonesian case). Indigenous groups were largely shielded from external economic pressures and were encouraged to preserve their traditional ways of life (Pringle, 1970).

However, Sarawak was not insulated from the labour migration patterns experienced elsewhere in Malaysia. The significant demographic changes in Sarawak can be attributed to the influx of Chinese migrants since the 1920s, primarily to work in the agricultural sector. The earliest Chinese settlers in Sarawak were predominantly Hakka, migrating from north-western Borneo (Kalimantan) and settling in Bau, south-east of Kuching (First Division), where they developed gold mines. Subsequently, the Foochow community arrived in the Third Division (Rejang River) as farmers and later emerged as the most economically influential Chinese dialect group through their involvement in the timber industry. In contrast, the Indian population in Sarawak remained negligible compared to Peninsular Malaya.

The Dutch East Indies experienced pronounced social stratification, including periods of administrative segregation in certain regions. Communities were officially classified into three categories: European, Foreign Oriental, and Indigenous. Each group had access to distinct social and educational services and was governed by separate legal frameworks.

In West Kalimantan, the native ethnic demography during colonial times was largely divided between Malays in the coastal regions and non-Muslim Indigenous groups in the hinterland. These Indigenous communities, later collectively referred to as Dayaks, share ethnic ties with those in neighbouring Sarawak. Many Dayaks, particularly those living near Malay sultanates, were historically subordinated to these feudal rulers. Alongside the Dayaks and Malays, the Chinese constituted the third largest ethnic group in West Kalimantan. Their presence expanded substantially in the mid-18th century, initially invited by local sultanates to mine gold. As their population grew, Chinese settlers diversified into farming and trade, concentrating mainly in coastal towns such as Pontianak, Pemangkat, and Singkawang, as well as in present-day Sambas, Bengkayang, and Landak districts. Economically and politically, their organisations (known as *kongsi*) became influential, eventually challenging the authority of local Malay sultanates. With Dutch assistance, Chinese rebellions were suppressed, enabling the Malay sultanates to regain control under Dutch oversight. Nevertheless, the Dutch continued to support Chinese leaders in administering their communities, particularly in cultural and economic affairs. On the Chinese of West Kalimantan, see Somers-Heidhues (2003) and Yuan (2000).

ETHNIC POLITICS LEADING AFTER WORLD WAR II

Both sides of Borneo experienced a short but brutal period under Japanese occupation during the Second World War. While they shared a broadly similar trajectory, including suffering from violence, forced labour, and economic disruption, the timing and outcomes of their post-war transitions diverged. Post-war Malaya political activism started in Peninsular Malaysia when the discontent among the Malays, both from right- and left-wing nationalist to fight for the same cause, to oppose to the formation of the Malayan Union and the granting of equal citizenship to the non-Malays. It has led to the founding of the United Malays National organisation (UMNO) in 1946. Other ethnic groups followed the suit, including Chinese and Indians formed the political

organisations along the ethnic lines, namely Malay(si)an Chinese Association (MCA) and Malay(si)an Indian Congress (MIC) respectively. Malaya gained independence from Britain on 31 August 1957. Its Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was the leading figure supporting the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, which would unite Malaya and the rest of British colonies in the region, including Sarawak. Sarawak itself became a British Crown Colony in 1946 after the Brooke dynasty relinquished its rule (Chin, 1996). This change of power paved the way for constitutional reforms and, eventually, Sarawak's self-government on 22 July 1963 in the preparation to join the Federation of Malaysia. During this transition period, British colonial administration continued to play a role, particularly in defence and foreign affairs.

In the period leading to the formation of the Malaysian federation, local political leaders in Sarawak expressed concerns that the Borneo states would be subjected to domination by Malaya, effectively reducing them to a new form of internal colonisation. They were also apprehensive that existing disparities in socioeconomic development between Malaya and the Borneo states would widen further under a centralised federal system. In response to these anxieties, a range of political parties emerged in Sarawak, largely organised along regional and communal/racial (i.e. Chinese, Malay, and Dayak) lines, with the explicit aim of protecting the political interests and socio-economic position of the communities they represented. The Chinese were represented by the Sarawak United Peoples' Party (SUPP) and the Sarawak Chinese Association (SCA), while non-Chinese communities organised under various parties. Parti Negara Sarawak (PANAS) and Barisan Rakyat Jati Sarawak (BARJASA) represented Muslim natives, whereas the Iban, one of Sarawak's largest indigenous groups, were represented by the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) and Parti Pesaka Anak Sarawak (PESAKA). All but SUPP later formed the Sarawak Alliance, mirroring the collaborative model that would later underpin Barisan Nasional in Peninsular Malaysia. The Sarawak Alliance successfully campaigned for Sarawak's inclusion in the Federation of Malaysia, which was formalised on 16 September 1963 (Leigh, 1974).

As in Malaysia, where political activity gravitated toward Peninsular Malaya, post-war Indonesian political activism was concentrated primarily in Java and Sumatra, the locations of the main colonial administrative centres and major commercial hubs. Across the archipelago, various ethnic communities established social organisations, many of which engaged in political advocacy. Among the groups classified as 'foreigners', the Chinese community was particularly prominent. They formed several political associations and parties, although they faced complex challenges related to nationality, citizenship, and political identity. In the lead-up to the 1955 general election, the relatively small number of Chinese politicians were dispersed across mainstream nationalist and religious parties, even though many maintained affiliations with the Chinese association: Baperki. Despite this presence, Baperki remained a relatively minor actor and exercised limited influence in national politics.

In contrast to Malaysia, where ethnic politics became institutionalised during the early stages of state formation, regional rather than ethnic politics played the more significant role in Indonesia. Ethnic politics emerged strongly only in a few regions, such as West Kalimantan, where historical patterns of inter-group relations and demographic configurations differed markedly from those in the political centre.

Like Sarawak, where British colonial officials played significant roles in managing the political transition prior to the state's formal incorporation into the Federation of Malaysia, Dutch influence remained substantial in West Kalimantan in the immediate post-war period. Between 1946 and 1950, West Kalimantan existed as an autonomous political entity known as the West Kalimantan Special Region (*Daerah Istimewa Kalimantan Barat* - DIKB). Under Dutch

administration, a form of ‘representative politics’ resembling consociationalism was incorporated into the governing structures, and policies, including those related to education, were designed to accommodate and manage the region’s major ethnic groups.

During this period, the regional council included representatives from Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities, along with several Dutch, Arab, and traditional leaders or sultans. These representatives were allocated and appointed by the Dutch authorities. The Dayaks, who had been largely sidelined politically during the sultanate era, were incorporated into government and the bureaucracy for the first time. They were mobilised through the Dayak Unity Party (*Partai Persatuan Dayak*). The Chinese inclusion in government councils was based primarily on residency and socio-economic roles rather than on clearly defined legal status – as citizenship status had not been the concerns at that time. In this regard, Dutch policies can be viewed as emancipatory or affirmative, extending limited political representation to both Dayak and Chinese communities. This ethnically based representative framework lasted for less than five years and was dismantled following the dissolution of the federal system and the full integration of West Kalimantan into the unitary Republic of Indonesia in 1950.

COOPTATION AND NATION-BUILDING

The intensified nation-building process began following the formation of the respective states. Given its federal structure, Sarawak occupied a better bargaining position compared to West Kalimantan, which was part of a unitary state where power was concentrated in a central government. However, as will be demonstrated below, both the national and federal governments have intervened in state and provincial politics to ensure alignment with central agendas. Any notion of Sarawak’s ‘autonomous’ status has been gradually eroded over time through institutional and political centralisation.

In Malaysia, the nation-building process accelerated after the formation of the state in 1963. Through a series of negotiations, the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63) was concluded, setting out the terms under which Sabah and Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaysia. Under MA63, both states were granted special rights and considerable autonomy in areas such as language, religion, parliamentary representation, revenue, and immigration.

Ethnic politics continued to shape political processes during and after the formation of the federation. It continued to be significant not only due to ethnic tension, but also because of the long-standing issues such as land ownership, government position and opposing conceptions of Sarawak identity. This was further complicated by federal intervention into the state matter, when Tun Jugah, the Iban leader was rejected as the Sarawak Governor in 1963 and the dismissal of Stephen Kalong Ningkan, another Iban leader as Chief Minister in 1966. These political developments has pushed some local parties inclined towards federal government in Kuala Lumpur and subsequently weakening Sarawak’s autonomy.

The polling in East Malaysia was suspended on 15 May due to the 13 May 1969 ethnic riots incident in Peninsular Malaysia. However, the tensed ethnic tension remained mostly in the Peninsular and had limited direct impact on Sarawak’s ethnic relations, largely because Sarawak’s political and social context was distinct.

Nevertheless, the development of Sarawak during this period was profoundly shaped by the communist insurgency, commonly referred to as the “Second Emergency” (1960s–1990). The activities of the Sarawak Communist Organisation (SCO) generated widespread suspicion toward the Sarawakian Chinese community, many of whom were subjected to security restrictions,

resettlement, and close surveillance by the authorities. Interestingly, the SCO's operations and messaging also drew sympathy from segments of the Chinese population living along the border with Indonesian West Kalimantan – further shows linkages between the two regions.

In Indonesia, nation-building intensified following the collapse of the Dutch-sponsored federal system soon after the Netherlands recognised Indonesian sovereignty in 1949. This process involved purging officials deemed “pro-Dutch” from regional administrations, restructuring the party system to curb regionalism and separatist tendencies, and consolidating authority within the unitary state. In West Kalimantan, the dissolution of the Dutch-sponsored DIKB was followed by a programme of political “cleansing” and nationalisation. Members of the DIKB governing body were dispersed and replaced by centrally appointed officials. Ethnically defined administrative offices (such as the Dayak Affairs Office and the Chinese Affairs Office) were abolished as remnants of colonial divide-and-rule strategies (Tanasaldy, 2012: 94-9). The Malay sultanates, which had collaborated with Dutch authorities, were abolished following the collapse of the federal system. Nevertheless, Malays continued to dominate the bureaucracy and remained politically active across nationally recognised parties, and prominent in local and provincial politics.

Dayak elites who were accused of harbouring pro Dutch sympathies lost their positions and became targets of political slurs, although they largely avoided legal reprisals. They continued their political engagement through the Dayak Unity Party (PD), which rose to prominence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. PD achieved notable electoral success during this period: four of the seven district heads were Dayak, and the provincial governor was also drawn from the Dayak community (Davidson, 2003).

By contrast, with the dissolution of DIKB, the political influence of the Chinese community declined markedly. The incorporation of West Kalimantan as a province of Indonesia meant that major policies were now governed by national directives, including those concerning citizenship. Under the citizenship laws of the early 1950s, most Chinese residents were not automatically recognised as Indonesian citizens unless they could provide the required documentation (refer to Willmott, 2009). This situation differed from Malaysia, where Chinese residents were afforded citizenship under far more lenient provisions. At the same time, many local Chinese actors were more engaged with political developments in China and remained largely indifferent to Indonesian party politics. Consequently, their participation in West Kalimantan's elections during the 1950s was minimal.

To counter growing regionalism, the Indonesian government introduced new regulations on political parties at the end of the 1950s. Parties seeking to contest elections were required to maintain a minimum number of branches across the country, an explicit effort to dismantle regionally based political organisations. Although PD achieved considerable success in West Kalimantan, its clearly ethnic foundation limited its ability to expand into other Kalimantan provinces or beyond. To remain electorally viable, PD leaders chose to disband and merge with national parties. Most members joined *Partai Indonesia* (Partindo), while others entered the Catholic Party. Dayak identity continued to resonate within these new political structures, although it was no longer expressed through exclusive ethnic party organisation.

Due to their close association with Partindo—a left-leaning party that strongly supported Soekarno and his Guided Democracy—the Dayak political elite lost their positions once Soekarno was deposed. In the aftermath, Dayak politicians sought new political affiliations, a process that further fragmented ethnic cohesion. Under the authoritarian New Order regime, their ethnic influence in provincial politics was effectively dismantled.

The Chinese community in the province experienced a similar marginalisation, being effectively disenfranchised due to their non-citizen status. Their position became even more precarious when they were implicated—fairly or otherwise—in communist insurgencies associated with Sarawakian Chinese networks. In 1967, the New Order authorities mobilised Dayak groups to forcibly expel Chinese communities from several districts and interior areas, leaving a deep and enduring scar on Dayak–Chinese relations.

Following Soekarno's demise, West Kalimantan's Chinese community became largely excluded from formal politics and experienced systemic discrimination that rendered them *de facto* second-class citizens, similar to patterns observed elsewhere in Indonesia. By contrast, Sarawakian Chinese continued to play an important role in regional politics. A similar divergence can be observed among the Dayaks: while Dayaks in Sarawak maintained their political prominence, Dayak influence in West Kalimantan declined sharply during the same period. Malays, regarded as close allies of the national or federal government, retained a dominant political position in both Sarawak and West Kalimantan; in the latter case, however, their influence operated largely under the authority and direction of centrally appointed Javanese officials.

CONSOLIDATING AUTHORITARIANISM

The 1970s indicated a period of extending authoritarianism in Malaysia and Indonesia, causing the provincial and regional power eroded in both Sarawak and West Kalimantan.

Following the 1963 election, the federal government interfered in the appointment of both the state Governor and Chief Minister posts in Sarawak. Instead of appointing Iban leaders to hold both positions, the federal government suggested that if an Iban politician were to become Chief Minister, then a Malay leader should be appointed as the Governor. These interferences set a precedent that federal emergency powers could overrule state autonomy and embed a federalised model of political control. This model would limit Sarawak's capacity for self-government for coming decades.

Other issues also demonstrated the growing influence of the federal government at the expense of local autonomy. Policies aimed at strengthening Malaysian unity were adopted by the federal authorities by replacing key expatriates in Sarawak. It was perceived that Kuala Lumpur would find it easier to deal with inexperienced local officers; consequently, West Malaysians were seconded to the Sarawak State Public Service. While Sarawak retains its particularity in language and education as enshrined in MA63, the federal government has continued to emphasise the importance of Malay as the national language and as a touchstone of one's loyalty to the country. Although the position of English remains formally recognised, in practical terms its standard has declined; this is believed to be partly driven by campaigns promoting a greater role for Malay in official correspondence and school instruction.

However, not all impositions went unnoticed and without reactions. There have been many contentions about 'Malayisation' of the state bureaucracy, and instead called for greater 'Borneosation' of the civil service. Efforts to replicate UMNO-style in Sarawak was not successful.

Indonesia experienced similar but stronger centralisation and authoritarianism. While authoritarian Soekarno allowed regional politics and local politics to develop their unique path, the New Order regime wanting uniformity, hence centralisation was paramount. The first election under Indonesia's New Order regime, held in 1971, was conducted under strict state control to secure victory for the government-backed party, Golkar. In West Kalimantan, pressure on Dayak politicians to join Golkar was intense. Former Dayak leaders who had previously been stripped of

political power were compelled to publicly endorse Golkar, with only a few remaining in other parties. Following the 1971 elections, Dayak ethnic and regional politics lost prominence, subsumed under the national agenda. Ethnic concerns were relegated to the periphery, as raising such issues was perceived as undermining national unity.

The status of the other two major ethnic groups remained largely unchanged. Malays, long entrenched in the bureaucracy, continued to dominate government service and frequently occupied senior positions just below centrally appointed officials. The legal status of the Chinese community remained largely unresolved until 1982, when citizenship was granted en masse, primarily to secure electoral support for Golkar. Their political roles, following the national trend, were also almost non-existent.

Golkar's dominance extended across both national and regional politics during the New Order. Policies aimed at strengthening national unity elevated Java and the Javanese to a central position in governance and policy-making, while the military penetrated deeply into the bureaucracy. All senior bureaucratic positions in the regions were centrally appointed, often filled by individuals with military backgrounds and predominantly originating from Java. Policy-making was highly centralised, leaving regional governments to function primarily as implementers of directives, and dissent or alternative proposals were discouraged. Meanwhile, the growth of Javanese and Madurese populations began to alter ethnic balances in several areas. In this context, ethnic conflict erupted in 1997 between the Dayaks and the Madurese—a migrant group—less than a year before the collapse of the regime in 1998.

TRANSITION BEYOND AUTHORITARIAN RULE

Malaysia and Indonesia were both under the dominant control of a single political power that shaped government policies and political dynamics from the 1970s. In Malaysia, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), as the core of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, had governed the country since independence in 1957. However, it has started to weaken since late 1990s, and subsequently lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority in the 2008 general election, the first time ever in Malaysian political history.

The 14th General Election, held in May 2018, has been regarded as its most significant election. The election results were surprised to many as it was the first time BN, after 61 years of continuous rule, was ousted from power by the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition. The decline of UMNO's dominance in Malaysia's politics indicated a significant transformation in the country's political culture and governance matter (Pepinsky, 2019). The consequence has been extensive, with Sarawak emerging as a distinctive case for study.

In fact, Sarawak's political landscape was already experiencing steady yet substantial moves before 2018. The Sarawak state-based political parties tried to distinct itself from the scandals and issues facing BN especially controversies surrounding governance and corruption (Chin, 2018). Following BN's defeat in May 2018, Sarawak-based parties, including Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) and Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), decided to withdraw from BN and formed the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) in June 2018. This political move indicated a significant moment towards prioritising Sarawak-centric policies and autonomy. This change was sparked by a rising sentiment among Sarawakians that their identity and rights under MA63 had long been neglected by the peninsular Malaysia federal administrations. As observed by Leong (2021), the state's leaders have

leveraged this transitional window to fight for Sarawak's rights and play a key role in Malaysia's federal structure.

The decline of UMNO's hegemony presented a suitable opportunity for GPS leaders to advocate more strongly on issues such as the equitable distribution of oil and gas revenue, the recognition of Sarawak's territorial rights and the devolution of power in education and health. GPS positioned itself in a stronger bargaining position vis-à-vis the Pakatan Harapan administration.

For Dayak politics, this shift creates brings upon both an opportunity to fight for meaningful development and recognition of indigenous rights; but also a challenge to overcome internal conflicts and tensions to ensure equitable representation in a rapidly changing political environment. The Dayak-based political parties need to advocate for Dayak interests so that they would not be marginalised within the broader Sarawak agenda.

Political parties operate as one cohesive family in the GPS coalition, even though Dayak community is represented across different parties, including PBB, PRS, SUPP and PDP. Dayak leaders share a common understanding of their political objective and work together to make sure the Dayak people is not side-lined in the political landscape despite of their party affiliation (J. Salang, personal communication, January 24, 2025).

The Dayak community still facing socioeconomic disparities, especially in infrastructure development and integration into the economy despite the significant progress within the state. Many Dayak people remain geographically isolated, with limited access to essential infrastructure such as roads, electricity and clean water. In addition, the transition to a modern economy has not been fully adapted among the Dayak community due to structural barriers and limited economic activities. The lack of appreciation and support for their economic contributions further aggravates these challenges, constraining their capability to benefit from broader economic growth. Targeted politics and inclusive development strategies that recognise the needs and unique cultural context of the Dayak people are needed to address the issues faced by the community (J. Salang, personal communication, January 24, 2025).

As a political party rooted in the Dayak community, PRS shows a deep understanding of both the people and the constitutional framework by fielding a Dayak candidate for elections. This strategic decision reflects the party's commitment to make sure the voices and concerns of the Dayak population are represented effectively in the government. PRS managed to strengthen its ability to address local issues with greater sensitivity and relevance by choosing a leader who shares the common cultural background and lived experiences of the community. This led to PRS to reinforce its role as a political entity that truly understands and advocates for the interests of the Dayak community.

Similar to Malaysia, Indonesia also experienced single-party domination, with Golkar maintaining control throughout the New Order era. Golkar consistently secured overwhelming victories, obtaining at least 62% of the national vote in every election from 1971 onwards, largely through electoral mobilisation and manipulation. However, unlike Malaysia, which underwent several leadership changes within UMNO, Indonesia remained under the authoritarian rule of President Soeharto until his resignation in May 1998. Golkar lost its domination in the first free general election in 1999, obtaining about 23% of the national vote (Populi Center 2021).

During the New Order, ethnic politics and regionalism were systematically suppressed; any resistance to central authority or its policies was met with severe repression. In contrast, Malaysia's federal system, although prioritising national interests over regional autonomy, still permitted a

degree of self-governance at the state level, an option that did not exist in Indonesia until the post Soeharto era.

The democratisation process that followed Soeharto's fall triggered sweeping changes in Indonesia's political structure and unleashed a surge of civil movements that had previously been curtailed under authoritarian rule. Numerous new political parties emerged, some adopting explicitly ethnic or religious platforms. The rapid decentralisation reforms and the proliferation of new administrative regions created unprecedented opportunities for political contestation among groups that had long been marginalised.

These dynamics were particularly evident in West Kalimantan, a province with a distinctive ethnic composition and a long history of ethnic politics. The Dayaks, who had been politically subordinated for decades, seized the opportunity in the post authoritarian period to assert their influence. They mounted vigorous campaigns to support Dayak candidates in both district and gubernatorial elections. During the final three decades of the New Order, despite widespread dissatisfaction, Dayaks had little choice but to accept nonlocal leaders and to operate under the domination of Malay bureaucrats.

In the post Reform era, however, Dayak candidates succeeded in securing key political positions; in some cases, this occurred through shows of force, although more commonly it was achieved through strategic manoeuvres and alliances, including collaboration with the Chinese community. These developments culminated in the election of Cornelis as the first Dayak governor of West Kalimantan since the removal of Oevaang Oeray in 1966. Dayaks also achieved electoral victories in several districts where they constitute a majority. (Tanasaldy, 2012).

The experience of the Chinese community was equally remarkable. Nationally, Chinese Indonesians established several political parties, one of which—the Unity in Diversity Party (*Partai Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, PBI), achieved notable success in West Kalimantan, with support from influential Dayak leaders. For the first time in West Kalimantan's history, Chinese Indonesians attained significant political prominence, securing executive positions such as deputy governor, district head, and mayor; they also won numerous parliamentary seats in regions with large Chinese populations (Tanasaldy, 2015).

The Malays, who had historically dominated the bureaucracy beneath centrally appointed leaders, faced a reconfiguration of recruitment practices and the erosion of their traditional influence over bureaucratic and policymaking structures in some regions. In several instances, positions previously reserved for Muslims—such as heads of religious affairs—became contestable in Dayak-majority, predominantly Catholic/Christian areas.

While the outcomes of direct elections for executive heads can be unpredictable, ethnic considerations have consistently remained a central factor in many contests. This tendency is evident in the ethnic composition of candidates and their running mates; it was also observable, particularly in the early years following the demise of the New Order, in the ethnic issues and tensions that surfaced during electoral campaigns. Although ethnic tensions during elections continue to appear in certain cases, the creation of districts intended to accommodate ethnic aspirations, together with the rise of cross ethnic candidacies, has played an important role in preventing political crises such as those that occurred during the first decade of the Reform era from escalating. This mutual recognition of each group's political domain constitutes a form of power sharing; it also echoes the objectives that consociationalism seeks to achieve.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's political landscape is shaped by ethnic politics, demanding constant negotiation between federal integration and regional diversity, and this case is especially evident in Sarawak. In order to manage diversity that resembles a consociational arrangement, ethnic elites will accommodate through power sharing, elite bargaining and institutional guarantees. For the case of Sarawak, it received distinctive constitutional safeguards including immigration control, and rights within MA63. These provisions were intended to recognise Sarawak's multi-ethnic composition and to preserve a measure of regional autonomy through elite accommodation rather than mass mobilisation. However, in reality, Sarawak is still embedded within federal party coalitions and dependent on federal fiscal transfers, which has significantly constraint the state's autonomous political authority.

Sarawak's politics act within a more plural and fragmented dominated by Dayaks, Malays and Chinese communities, with each is differentiated by subethnic, and religious identities. This fragmentation has once limited the emergence of cohesive blocs capable of challenging federal authority and advocating for state rights. However, following BN's loss of power at the federal level, the rigid ethnic boundaries have blurred. While ethnic identity continues to shape representation and electoral competition, Sarawak's post-BN era shows a more negotiated form of elite accommodation, moving from rigid consociational control towards a pragmatic coalition that embeds regional diversity.

Indonesia, by contrast, has followed a fundamentally different trajectory in managing ethnic diversity, grounded less in consociational accommodation than in alternating phases of centralisation and decentralisation. Under Soekarno's Guided Democracy, regional leaders and ethnic identities were acknowledged to a limited extent through reliance on local elites and mass organisations, despite persistent tensions with separatist movements; this limited accommodation was replaced under the New Order by a highly centralised and coercive system under President Soeharto, where military oversight, bureaucratic uniformity, and political repression curtailed regional autonomy and suppressed ethnic mobilisation. The collapse of the New Order in 1998 marked a decisive break. The Reformasi era introduced deep decentralisation that transferred extensive authority over governance, budgeting, and executive leadership to districts; rather than elite power sharing at the centre, Indonesia adopted territorial autonomy as a mechanism for managing ethnic diversity, creating new institutional opportunities for ethnic mobilisation at the local level.

West Kalimantan, aside from a brief Dutch supported DIKB interlude that experimented with ethnic based representation closer to consociational practice, predominantly mirrored national dynamics. For much of the post-independence period, regional political life reflected centralised and non ethnicised structures, apart from the dominance of Javanese officials at the upper levels of the regional bureaucracy; this configuration limited the institutional expression of ethnic interests. Decentralisation fundamentally altered this pattern by enabling the political ascent of Dayak and Chinese communities in local governance, the two largest ethnic groups apart from the traditionally and politically influential Malay population. Direct local elections, expanded regional control over resources, and the proliferation of administrative units allowed these groups to convert demographic presence into political representation and executive authority; for Dayaks, this facilitated a revival of indigenous leadership after decades of marginalisation, while for Chinese Indonesians, long excluded from formal participation, it enabled unprecedented mobilisation and elite formation. Unlike Malaysia's federal system, which approximates a consociational model

through centralised coalition bargaining, Indonesia's decentralised framework in West Kalimantan produced a more competitive and locally driven form of ethnic politics. Regional autonomy reshaped power relations and moderated conflict not through centralised elite agreements, but through institutionalised local competition and territorially grounded inclusion.

Taken together, these courses marked two different pathways for managing diversity. In Malaysia, a consociational style accommodation anchored in federal bargains has long tied regional elites to the centre and provided a durable model for structuring ethnic representation. Although shifts in the federal political landscape have prompted periodic realignments, they have not fundamentally altered a pattern of politics that remains heavily shaped by ethnic platforms and concerns. In Indonesia, by contrast, centre-periphery relations have fluctuated considerably. An early period of limited accommodation of regional aspirations gave way to the highly centralised and coercive governance of the New Order, which was subsequently replaced by extensive decentralisation following its collapse. Both Indonesia and Malaysia have also experienced a high degree of political manoeuvring at the regional level; when opportunities arise, these regional dynamics at times diverge from national political patterns, reflecting locally embedded configurations of ethnicity, leadership networks, and institutional opportunity.

These findings point to the continuing importance of institutional pathways in shaping subnational ethnic politics, while also suggesting that such arrangements remain dynamic rather than fixed. At the same time, the analysis is subject to several limitations, including uneven data availability across the two regions and the constraints of comparing cases with distinct historical and socio-political trajectories. Looking ahead, future research could extend this comparison to other border regions beyond Borneo and examine how ongoing political realignments continue to reshape centre-periphery relations and ethnic representation, not only in both countries but also across the wider region.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank the Tun Tan Cheng Lock Institute of Social Studies, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, for supporting this research.

REFERENCES

- Chin, J. (1996). PBDS and ethnic politics in Sarawak. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 26(4), 512–526.
- Chin, J. (2018). Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia: The issue of autonomy. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 26(1), 78–96.
- Chong, T. (2021). Sarawak's quest for autonomy: Revisiting the Dayak political struggle. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 52(2), 297–312.
- Cramb, R. A. (2019). *The politics of land in Sarawak: Native customary rights and development*. NUS Press.
- Davidson, J. (2003). "Primitive" politics: The rise and fall of the Dayak Unity Party in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Asia Research Institute Working Paper No. 9.
- Dijk, C. Van. (2002). Colonial fears, 1890–1918: Pan-Islamism and the Germano-Indian plot. In H. de Jonge & N. J. G. Kaptein (Eds.), *Transcending borders: Arabs, politics, trade and Islam in Southeast Asia*. KITLV Press.
- Economic Planning Unit, Sarawak. (2022). *Sarawak facts and figures 2021*. Chief Minister's Department, Sarawak.

- Esman, M. J. (1994). *Ethnic politics*. Cornell University Press.
- Furnivall, J. S. (1939). *Europeans in Burma of the fifteenth century*. JBRS 29, (3), 236–249.
- Gomez, E. T., & Saravanamuttu, J. (Eds.). (2013). *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia: Affirmative action, ethnic inequalities, and social justice*. NUS Press.
- Heeren, H. J. (1979). *Transmigrasi di Indonesia*. Gramedia.
- Hirschman, C. (1986). The making of race in colonial Malaya: Political economy and racial ideology. *Sociological Forum*, 1(2), 330–361.
- Horowitz, D. L. (1985). *Ethnic groups in conflict*. University of California Press.
- Jomo, K. S. (1986). *A question of class: Capital, the state, and uneven development in Malaya*. Oxford University Press.
- Leigh, M. (1974). *The rising moon: Political change in Sarawak*. Sydney University Press.
- Leong, C. H. (2021). Sarawak's push for autonomy in post-UMNO Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 29(3), 213–232.
- Lijphart, A. (1977). *Democracy in plural societies: A comparative exploration*. Yale University Press.
- Milne, R. S., & Ratnam, K. J. (1974). *Malaysia: New states in a new nation—Political development of Sarawak and Sabah in Malaysia*. Frank Cass.
- Pepinsky, T. (2019). The end of UMNO's dominance: Implications for ethnic politics. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 50(4), 595–608.
- Pringle, R. (1970). *Rajahs and rebels: The Ibans of Sarawak under Brooke rule, 1841–1941*. Cornell University Press.
- Reilly, B. (2006). Political engineering and party politics in conflict-prone societies. *Democratization*, 13(5), 811–827.
- Searle, P. (2006). *The riddle of Malaysian capitalism: Rent-seekers or real capitalists?* Allen & Unwin.
- Shamsul, A. B. (2005). The construction and management of pluralism: Sharing the Malaysian experience. *ICIP Journal*, 2(1), 1–14.
- Somers-Heidhues, M. (2003). *Gold diggers, farmers, and traders in the “Chinese districts” of West Kalimantan, Indonesia*. Cornell Southeast Asia Program.
- Tanasaldy, T. (2012). *Regime change and ethnic politics in Indonesia: Dayak politics of West Kalimantan*. Brill.
- Tanasaldy, T. (2015). A decade after the reform: Political activism of the Chinese of West Kalimantan, Indonesia.
- Willmott, D. E. (2009). *The national status of the Chinese in Indonesia, 1900–1958*. Equinox Publishing.
- Yuan, B. (2000). *Chinese democracies: A study of the kongsis of West Borneo (1776–1884)*. Research School of Asian, Pacific and Australian Studies, Australian National University.

BIODATA OF AUTHORS:

Taufiq Tanasaldy
University of Tasmania, Australia
Email: taufiq.tanasaldy@utas.edu.au

Tan Sing Pei (Corresponding Author)
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia
Email: tansingpei@utar.edu.my