

## Anti-Federal Sentiment in Sabah and its Impact on Malaysian Politics

### *Sentimen Anti Persekutuan di Sabah dan Impaknya terhadap Politik Malaysia*

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#### ABSTRACT

*The conflict between the federal government and the state of Sabah has occurred since 1963 stemming from the dissatisfaction of the people of Sabah towards the implementation of their autonomy rights as contained in the 1963 Malaysia Agreement (MA63). This dissatisfaction led to an anti-federal sentiment among the people of Sabah towards the federal government, which threatened the stability of the Federation of Malaysia. Hence, this study examines the factors leading to the emergence of anti-federal sentiment in Sabah and assesses the impact of such sentiment on Malaysian politics utilising the concept of federalism as an analytical tools. The primary source of this article comprised interviews, whereas books, journals, official government reports, articles and news portals were used as its secondary sources. Findings revealed that the factors promoting the anti-federal sentiment among Sabahans are the dissatisfaction with the implementation of autonomy rights and MA63, the imbalance in infrastructure development, the socio-economic gap between Sabah and the states in the Peninsula, distribution of oil royalties and the presence of illegal immigrants. This anti-federal sentiment has created a strained relationship between the federal government and Sabah, the demand for self-government, the fading of patriotism, the threat to national harmony and unity, the rise of state nationalism and the decline of the people's nationalism. Consequently, this sentiment threatens the stability of the federation and therefore requires an immediate solution to maintain national unity and sovereignty.*

*Keywords: Federation of Malaysia; Malaysia Agreement 1963; Sabah; state nationalism; anti-federal*

#### ABSTRAK

*Konflik kerajaan persekutuan dengan negeri Sabah telah berlaku sejak tahun 1963 lagi akibat perasaan tidak puas hati rakyat Sabah terhadap pelaksanaan hak-hak autonomi mereka seperti yang terkandung dalam Perjanjian Malaysia 1963 (MA63). Ini kemudiannya mewujudkan perasaan anti federal rakyat Sabah terhadap kerajaan pusat yang menggugat kestabilan Persekutuan Malaysia. Dengan menggunakan konsep federalisme sebagai alat analisis, artikel ini meneliti faktor yang menyebabkan munculnya sentimen anti persekutuan di Sabah dan menilai impak sentimen tersebut terhadap politik Malaysia. Sumber primer artikel ini adalah melalui temu bual, manakala sumber sekunder pula adalah dari buku, jurnal, laporan rasmi kerajaan, makalah dan portal berita. Hasil analisis mendapati faktor timbulnya sentimen anti persekutuan penduduk Sabah adalah kerana mereka tidak berpuas hati dengan pelaksanaan hak autonomi dan MA63, ketidakseimbangan pembangunan infrastruktur, jurang sosioekonomi antara Sabah dengan negeri-negeri di Semenanjung, pengagihan royalti minyak dan isu pendatang asing tanpa izin. Impak sentimen anti persekutuan ini adalah tegangnya hubungan kerajaan persekutuan dengan Sabah, tuntutan hak berpemerintahan sendiri, pudarnya semangat patriotisme, terancamnya keharmonian dan perpaduan negara, bangkitnya nasionalisme kenegerian, dan merosotnya semangat nasionalisme rakyat. Kesan sentimen ini menggugat kestabilan persekutuan dan oleh itu penyelesaian segera perlu dicari bagi mengekalkan perpaduan dan kedaulatan negara.*

*Kata kunci: Persekutuan Malaysia; Perjanjian Malaysia 1963; Sabah; state nationalism, anti-federal*

#### INTRODUCTION

History had shown how uncontrolled conflicts and anti-federal sentiments can result in the disintegration and collapse of the federal states. This can be seen in the cases of the Soviet Union (1920-1991), Czechoslovakia (1918-1993), Yugoslavia (1943-1994) as well as the Federation

of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1953-1963). The failure of such states to adapt and institutionalise the federal system, the high tendency for centralisation of power and assimilation between coalition units led to the existence of resistance to the federation, which eventually caused the disintegration of the states (Augustine 2019: 1).

Canada is also not spared from the crisis and anti-federal sentiment. In Quebec, this sentiment occurred from the existence of linguistic, religious, historical and cultural differences. Meanwhile, in Alberta and Saskatchewan, this sentiment existed due to the dissatisfaction of the two states with their economic wealth that was used to finance other states (Mintz2019:7). Anti-federal sentiment also occurred in the province of Catalonia, Spain which has cultural differences from other provinces. As a result, the people of the region voted to support the Catalan independence referendum in 2017. However, the referendum was rejected by the Spanish parliament causing the Spanish Senate to revoke the autonomous powers of the Catalan government as a response (Aranda & Kolling 2020: 337). These circumstances suggest that the linguistic, religious, historical and cultural as well as economic differences between the federation and the provinces have provoked dissatisfaction among the leaders and people in their provinces.

In Nigeria, on the other hand, ethnic and religious strife, state nationalism, separatist movements and a low spirit of unity were among the factors creating the anti-federal sentiment in the country. The failure of the Nigerian central government in solving this conflict has resulted in separatist demands by Biafran groups in the south and religious insurgencies such as Boko Haram in the north, leading to strained relations between the central government and the provinces (Herbert & Husaini 2018). The India-Kashmir conflict also occurred from factors of religious and cultural differences. Moreover, the actions of the federal government denying the autonomy rights of the provinces of Jammu and Kashmir have caused the Muslim population of Kashmir to demand secession from India. Similarly, in the case of Nigeria, the anti-federal sentiment that took place in Kashmir also led to insurgency and violence to the point of killing the people of Kashmir and Indian security personnel.

Malaysia is also experiencing anti-federal sentiment. Since its inception, federal and state relations have been often faced with conflicts, leading to anti-federal sentiments. The states of Sabah, Sarawak, Kelantan and Terengganu are among the states that have a conflict with the federal government. According to Yusoff (2006), there were two reasons behind this conflict. First, the state government was ruled by a party that was not in line with the ruling government at the central level. Second, the central government did not follow the

provisions of the division of powers as contained in the Ninth Schedule of the Federal Constitution. This conflict provoked the anger and hatred sentiments of the people of the state against the central government. In this regard, with reference to Sabah's experience, this article examines the factors influencing the emergence of anti-federal sentiment in the state and assesses its impact on Malaysian politics.

#### RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF FEDERALISM

Several scholars describe federalism as the following. First, it is a system of government that prioritises the sharing of power between the central and state governments. Second, this division of power is enshrined in the national constitution. Third, federalism is the best system of government as it avoids the centralisation of power by decentralising power to the states. Fourth, federalism can prevent conflict since it plays a role in accommodating the interests of central and state governments (Wheare 1967; Burgess 2006; Ward 2016). The above statements indicate that the concept of federalism is complex and diverse. Thus, Mohammad Agus (2002; 2006) unified the views of these different scholars by outlining the characteristics of federalism as follows. First, there are two forms of government that rule a country and the people alike. Second, every government has its own territory with guaranteed power. Third, federal states are born out of the will of states to unite under one alliance, but states can retain their racial and territorial identities. Fourth, the states forming the federation are willing to sacrifice their sovereignty by handing it over to the federation. Fifth, a federal state is not composed of itself but is formed. Sixth, a written constitution is an important key in delineating the boundaries of power between the two.

These characteristics demonstrate that Malaysia is a federal state based on the mutual agreement of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak to combine through the signing of the Malaysia Agreement (MA63). Upon its formation, the federal and state governments have their respective jurisdictions as enshrined in the Ninth Schedule of the Federal Constitution. This division of powers known as the Federal and State Lists bestows both levels of government the power to enact and enforce laws in their respective jurisdictions. Nevertheless, federal law will apply should there be a conflict of law as stated in Article

75 (1), Federal Constitution: “If any State law is inconsistent with a federal law, the federal law shall prevail and the State law shall, to the extent of the inconsistency, be void.”

Although the division of power between the federal and state governments has been enshrined in the constitution, the Malaysian system is more inclined to the central government. Yeoh (2019:19) states: “Federal-state relations in Malaysia have evolved over the years, where although the country was formed as a federalism, it has increasingly become highly centralised in its administrative and fiscal practices.” The centralisation of power by the federal government has caused discomfort among the states in Malaysia, especially Sabah, which feel that it does not have the power to govern and manage its own states. The failure of the federation to follow the agreement on the formation of the Federation of Malaysia caused the state of Borneo to claim its special rights as enshrined in MA63 and Article 20 of the Report of the Intergovernmental Committee (ICG).

The dissatisfaction of the people of Sabah has given rise to anti-federal sentiment, which later caused anti-federal groups to demand the right to self-government to take Sabah out of Malaysia. They felt that the central government no longer cares about their rights and that they have been oppressed. Accordingly, using the concept of federalism as a tool of analysis, this article examines the factors influencing the emergence of anti-federal sentiment in the state and its impact on Malaysian politics.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW ON ANTI-FEDERAL SENTIMENT

Previous studies on the anti-federal sentiment in federal countries have been extensively studied by scholars, be it in developed, developing countries or Malaysia. Mintz (2019) in his book *Two different conflicts in federal systems: An application to Canada* examined the two forms of territorial conflict that occurred in the Canadian federalism system, namely the conflict of taste and the conflict of claims. In the case of Canada, conflict of taste and conflict of claim arose as a result of political differences among the population between provinces within the federation. This conflict of taste occurred in the province of Quebec, which has ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical and cultural differences from other Canadian provinces. The majority of Quebec communities made French

their primary language, while other parts of Canada use English as their official language. Moreover, the culture and history of Quebec, which has ties to France, are also different from the majority of English-speaking Canadians. These differences affected the acceptance of central government policies by Quebec residents, particularly regarding education, language and health. Dissatisfaction arose when the policies implemented by the central government were at odds with the language and culture of the Quebec community, leading to demands for secession through the independence referendum in 1980 and 1995.

Conflict of claims occurs when one province has greater wealth than another. For instance, the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, which are rich in natural resources and were forced to share their wealth with other provinces, began to consider establishing their own states rather than continuing to be part of the federation. It is difficult to resolve this conflict since it involved the distribution of wealth, hence requiring the donor territory to feel that there is a benefit from the partnership. At the end of the analysis, Mintz (2019) suggested that Canada undertake institutional reform and decentralisation of central structures as a mechanism for resolving the conflict of claim.

Anderson (2020) in his article entitled *Decentralisation at a crossroads: Spain, Catalonia and the territorial crisis* wrote about the evolution of the territorial crisis faced by Spain, especially in Catalonia. He noted that the amendment of the Spanish constitution in 1978 had transformed Spain from a centralised dictatorship to liberal democracy by granting autonomy and decentralisation to the provinces. However, the exercised autonomy was asymmetrical to the Basque provinces, Catalonia and Galicia with greater autonomy compared to other Spanish provinces. According to Anderson (2020), this grant was due to historical factors. During the era of the Second Republic in Spain (1931-1939), territorial ethno conflict erupted. As a solution, the state constitution was formed by giving autonomy to these provinces causing other provinces to also demand the implementation of the same autonomy. To make autonomy more symmetrical for all regions, the Organic Law of Harmonisation of Autonomous Processes (LOAPA) 1982 was introduced. However, the law stipulates those provinces must first obtain approval from the central government before a law can be approved at the provincial level. This led the Basque and Catalan governments to vehemently

oppose this LOAPA, which in turn contributed to the emergence of tension in relations between the Catalan government and the central government.

Anderson's (2020) study mentioned the lack of recognition of Spain's pluri national status, centralisation and aggression by the central government, the absence of concurrent rules, and the role of the constitutional court as independent arbitrators in territorial dispute cases contributed to the strained relations between Catalonia and the central government. Thus, in the 2004 election, the Spanish political elite made the issue of not granting independence to Catalonia a key issue in their election campaign. In Catalonia, the local political elite campaigned for Catalonia's independence had caused support for the local party to increase in the region. The claim of Catalonia has put the Spanish constitution at a crossroads. At the end of his analysis, Anderson (2020) summarised two possible political scenarios over the provinces in Spain, namely the disintegration of Spain resulting from Catalonia's claims and Spanish politics that continue to be at a crossroads. He therefore suggested that the federal government should centralise power and undertake constitutional reforms and territorial forms.

In the Malaysian context, anti-federal sentiment is concentrated in Sabah and Sarawak. Mohammad Saiful and Anantha (2018) wrote about an anti-federal group entitled *Sabah Sarawak Keluar Malaysia (SSKM): Halatuju selepas PRU-14*. They stated that the establishment of SSKM was due to the dissatisfaction of the people of Sabah and Sarawak with the failure of the federal government to protect the interests of their states. The failure of the central government has caused Sabah and Sarawak to have the highest poverty rates in Malaysia despite having the richest natural resources (oil and gas). The group used the issue of the federal government's failure to grant privileges and autonomy as enshrined in the constitution to stir up anti-federal sentiment among the people of Sabah and Sarawak. As a result, the movement succeeded in making rural and inland communities aware of their rights. Local political parties have also used this issue to promote the people's hatred of the central government. After GE-14, the movement was no longer aggressive in spreading propaganda due to the transfer of government power from Barisan Nasional (BN) to Pakatan Harapan (PH) at the central and state levels. With the change of government, SSKM's struggle to demand the rights of Sabah and Sarawak began to receive cooperation and a positive response from the PH government.

Yeoh (2019) wrote about the decentralisation of federal power in his article *Reviving the spirit of federalism: Decentralisation policy option for a new Malaysia*. He revealed that the spirit of federalism in Malaysia was fading as the administrative and financial power of the federal government became more centralised. This is because the centralisation of power allows the central government to discriminate against the state government, which in turn creates anti-federal sentiment among the people. For example, the central government's action of taking state natural resources such as oil and gas, which is supposed to be a state power through the Petroleum Development Act 1974, has prompted several states to claim their rights on oil and gas. Yeoh (2019) also mentioned that the formation of national councils including the National Council of Local Government to formulate policies related to local government angered the state government as local government is under its jurisdiction. Apart from that, the federal government's move to open state development offices to channel development allocations in opposition states without having to report to the state government has also created conflict between the state and central governments. This encroachment on state power by the central government not only raised tensions in central-state government relations but also anti-federal sentiment towards the central government. With the victory of PH in the GE, Yeoh (2019) hoped that the PH government can restore the spirit of Malaysian federalism by reducing the centralisation of power and decentralising power.

At the end of his analysis, Yeoh (2019) proposed six administrative policy changes and two fiscal policies to be implemented to empower states and improve relations between the federation and states. Among his proposals are to review the Ninth Schedule of the Malaysian constitution to decentralise some key functions of the central government, form a full state civil service, consult with the state government in appointing key civil service posts, abolish federal development offices in the state, restore local council elections, increase the number of senators appointed by the state, consumer tax revenue received by the states and establish an independent grant commission to determine a fixed formula for transferring grants from the central government to the state.

Harding (2019) in his article *A measure of autonomy: Federalism as protection for Malaysia's indigenous peoples* discussed the protection of the

rights of Sabah and Sarawak indigenous people in Malaysian federalism. The protection of the rights of the indigenous people of the two states was the main thing demanded by the leaders of Sabah and Sarawak during the formation of Malaysia in 1963, which was related to language, culture, religion, natural resources, land and local customs. However, this protection was then eroded, causing the people of Sabah and Sarawak to worry about their rights. This concern arose from the attitude of the central government that often denies the rights of Sabah and Sarawak besides always interfering in the state administration. The undemocratic actions of the central government have weakened the autonomy of Sabah and Sarawak in protecting the rights of indigenous people. Harding (2019) also stated that although the main feature of the federation is the division of power between the federation and the state, the high centralisation of power in the federation has caused the autonomy and privileges of the natives of Sabah and Sarawak to be eroded. In addition, citizenship became a federal power that has seen the dumping of foreigners in Sabah with Malaysian citizenship in these two states despite having immigration powers. Similarly, Sabah and Sarawak still depend on the courtesy of the central government for financial allocation even though it has been stipulated in the constitution on special allocations and other financial resources for the two states. For Sabah and Sarawak, Malaysian federalism proved that the centralisation of power to the federation has eroded their autonomy, which then led to the emergence of anti-federal groups that heightened the anti-federal sentiment of the people of Sabah and Sarawak towards the federal government.

Harding (2019) explained three solutions to implement the autonomy of Sabah and Sarawak, namely through political processes at the state and central levels, the separation of Sabah and Sarawak from Malaysia, and the establishment of second Malaysian federalism by renegotiating the terms in the Malaysian federation. In addition, Harding (2019) also stated that decentralisation is necessary and that the protection of the interests of indigenous people and the autonomy of Sabah and Sarawak can only be done through the strengthening of democracy in the two states.

Chin (2019a) in his article *GE14 in East Malaysia: MA63 and marching to a different drum* wrote about the factors influencing the voting patterns of voters in Sabah and Sarawak in GE-

14. He asserted that the MA63 and the rise of state nationalism have had a huge influence on BN's failure to defend its seats in Sabah and Sarawak. Chin (2019a) divided the discussion on MA63 into three parts, namely the special position of Sabah and Sarawak, the issue of British consent and role, as well as the transfer of the UMNO model to Sabah and Sarawak.

From his findings, Chin (2019a) found that most promises of MA63 to give a special position to Sabah and Sarawak were not fulfilled by the federal government. First, Article 20/18 was not enforced except for immigration. Second, Merdeka Day was celebrated on 31 August in conjunction with Malaya's independence date, instead of in conjunction with Malaysia's founding day on 16 September 1963. Third, the status of Sabah and Sarawak was lowered through the amendment of Article 1 (2) of the constitution in 1976 from four entities to one of thirteen states. Fourth, the promise to provide development if Sabah and Sarawak agreed to form Malaysia was not fulfilled; instead, these two states are among the undeveloped states in Malaysia. Fifth, the federal government often interferes in the state administration and politics of Sabah Sarawak to ensure that the post of chief minister in Sabah and Sarawak is held by a Malay or at least a Muslim. Sixth, to prevent the use of the word Allah by Christians in Sabah and Sarawak even though they have used it since before the establishment of Malaysia.

At the end of his analysis, Chin argued that the federal government's action resulted in the emergence of anti-federal groups that aroused the spirit of state nationalism and made the MA63 issue a dominant issue in fighting for the rights and autonomy of Sabah and Sarawak. The emergence of separatist movements such as SSKM and the United Kingdom and Sabah Sarawak Rights Australia New Zealand (SSRANZ) that openly support separatism is evidence of the existence of anti-federal sentiment among the people of Sabah and Sarawak towards the federation.

The above reviews show that anti-federal sentiment in developed and developing countries emerged as a result of the existence of differences in language, culture, identity, history, economic discrimination, weak governance and centralisation of power. The dissatisfaction of the people in the territories in this federation has led to the emergence of anti-federal sentiment, which can be seen in the cases of Catalonia, Quebec, Kashmir and the

southern provinces of Nigeria. In Malaysia, the reviews indicate that the conflict between central relations with Sabah was due to dissatisfaction of Sabah towards the implementation of its autonomy rights as agreed in MA63, centralisation of power, the gap in development differences and central government administrative policies. Dissatisfaction with the central government later led to the emergence of anti-federal groups demanding the right to self-government. The above reviews are good and interesting, but most of them did not assess one important aspect that became the focus of this article, namely the impact of this anti-federal sentiment on federalism in a country. Thus, this article fills the gap by examining the factors creating anti-federal sentiment in Sabah and its impact on Malaysian politics.

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article used a qualitative research design. Aspers and Corte (2019:135) define qualitative research as “an interactive process in which improved understanding of the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied.” This qualitative design was used based on several considerations. First, it is an iterative process for improving the understanding of a phenomenon under study to obtain new findings. Second, this method emphasises efforts to find and provide evidence based on observations of the phenomena studied. Third, it is flexible and open to adapting to research conditions. Fourth, it is descriptive in nature through its method of analysing data to find relevance, add information and make comparisons. Thus, with a qualitative design, this article can well examine the factors influencing the emergence of anti-federal sentiment in Sabah and the impact of such sentiment on Malaysian politics.

Data collection for this article was carried out through primary and secondary sources. Primary data is described as the data obtained directly from informants through interviews. The people interviewed include Salleh Said Keruak (Usukan assemblyman and former federal communications and multimedia minister), Mahdzir Khalid (rural development minister), Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman (Muar MP and party president of MUDA (Malaysian United Democratic Alliance)), and Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar (minister in the Prime Minister’s Department (law and parliament)).

Meanwhile, the secondary data included published data such as books, journal articles, theses, official government annual reports, newspapers and news portals. These data were then descriptively analysed through the document analysis method.

#### FACTORS INFLUENCING THE EMERGENCE OF ANTI-FEDERAL SENTIMENT IN SABAH

This section addresses five main factors causing the emergence of anti-federal sentiment in Sabah, which are the dissatisfaction of the people of Sabah with the implementation of MA63 and Article 20, the imbalance in development between the Peninsula and Sabah, the socio-economic gap, oil royalty claims and the issue of illegal immigrants.

#### CLAIMS FOR AUTONOMY AND THE 1963 MALAYSIA AGREEMENT

The 1963 Malaysia Agreement (MA63), which is the basis for the formation of Malaysia in 1963, gave Sabah and Sarawak autonomy in the areas of language, religion, immigration, Borneonisation, finance and tariffs, as well as education and natural resources. However, the right to autonomy eroded as the federal government was not following the promises that have been agreed upon. The federal government’s move to use Malay instead of the English language and to prioritise Malaysianisation instead of Borneonisation in the deployment of officials in Sabah has provoked the anger and dissatisfaction of Sabah’s leaders and people towards the federation. When Sabah’s leaders insisted on demanding Sabah’s rights as contained in MA63, the federal government overcame it by interfering in state affairs and putting political pressure on those leaders. The case of the resignation of Donald Stephens in 1966 was the result of the actions of the federal government.

Similarly, during the rule of the Sabah United Party (PBS), the volume of its leaders demanding Sabah’s autonomy rights has resulted in several leaders being arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) on charges of wanting to take Sabah out of Malaysia. They were Damit Undikai, Benedict Topin, Abdul Rahman Ahmad, Vincent Chung, Dr Jeffry Kitingan, and Dr Maximus Ongkili (Mohammad Agus 2002: 11). Mahathir Mohammad, the prime minister at that time, said that he detained Dr Jeffry Kitingan and several PBS leaders for causing tensioned federal-state relations

(Mohammad Agus 2006: 294). The actions of the federal government to put political and economic pressure on Sabah during the era of PBS rule has sparked anti-Mahathir sentiment in Sabah. This sentiment had a long-lasting effect since it made Dr Mahathir decided not to campaign in Sabah during GE-14 and PRN-16 Sabah.

In the 20-point agreement, there are many issues that caused dissatisfaction among the people of Sabah. For instance, Sabah was given autonomy in immigration, but that power is limited to controlling the entry of Malaysians into the state. Sabah does not have the power to control the entry and expulsion of illegal immigrants. The limitation of immigration powers made them unable to cater for the problem of illegal immigrants in Sabah. This is also true for the freedom of religion. Article 1 of the 20-point agreement provides that the people of Sabah can freely practice their religion and that all legislation on Islam contained in the Malayan Constitution should not be applied in North Borneo. This is why the federal government's action to ban Sabah Christians from using the word Allah has angered the people of Sabah as it violated MA63 and the 20-point agreement. Salleh Said Keruak (2021), Sabah state assemblyman when interviewed explained:

MA63's demands and the right to autonomy are the most important issues for the people of Sabah. We feel that this right has been denied by the central government. The basis of these claims has led political parties to rush into offering a solution through their manifestos to attract the support of the people of Sabah during the election. The slogan 'Sabah for Sabahan' is powerful enough to inspire Sabah voters. With the high spirit of state nationalism, the people of Sabah strongly emphasised their importance compared to Malaysia. The federal government, which did not prioritise Sabah's interests, has been considered an enemy, causing anti-federal sentiment in Sabah.

Salleh Said's (2021) statement above is true from the perspective of Sabah's autonomy rights used by local political parties to gain voter support during the GE-14 in May 2018 and the state election in September 2020. Among the promises of these parties include upholding the rights of the state of Sabah, guaranteeing the security, unity and harmony of the people, guaranteeing customary land ownership rights and the rights of Sabah Bumiputera, and creating a ministry of education and a ministry of health for the welfare of the people. National parties also promised the same rights to attract the support of Sabah voters. The promises included autonomy rights, the restoration of Sabah's status based on MA63, special cabinet committees to

review and implement MA63, the growth of Sabah's economy, implementation of decentralisation of power to Sabah, as well as development, economic, human capital and security benefits to Sabah (Buku Harapan 2018; BN 2018).

The demands of MA63 and Sabah's right to autonomy are not only demanded by the leaders and the people, but also by anti-federal groups in Sabah. Anti-federal groups such as SSKM, S4S and SSM have raised the awareness of Sabahans, especially in rural and remote areas, on Sabah's autonomy rights. Apart from that, these groups also often criticised the federal government for not looking after the interests of the people of Sabah. These anti-federal groups not only emphasise the right to autonomy and MA63 but also instil hatred and xenophobia of the people of Sabah against the federation by accusing that the federation is colonial through social media as well as their talks and meetings with the people.

#### IMBALANCE IN INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

The imbalanced infrastructure development between the state of Sabah and other states in the federation is also a factor in the emergence of anti-federal sentiment in Sabah. This imbalance occurred due to the discrimination of the federal government against Sabah (Chin 2018). The federal government was more focused on development in the Peninsula through projects such as the Petronas twin tower mega project, Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), Light Rail Transit (LRT) and twin railways rather than thinking about state development. In contrast to the progress in the Peninsula, the condition of most of the roads in Sabah is still in very bad condition and unpaved. According to the Laporan Statistik Jalan Malaysia (2019), in 2017, the length of roads in the Peninsula was 166.3 thousand km (79.2 per cent paved), followed by Sarawak with 29.6 thousand km (61.72 per cent paved), and Sabah with 22.1 thousand km (46.54 per cent paved). The length of roads in Sabah is shorter compared to other states apart from the number of paved roads. This imbalance of development has left Sabahans frustrated with the federal government, giving rise to the narrative that says Kuala Lumpur has 'stolen' revenues from Sabah's oil and natural gas to finance development in the Peninsula (Chin 2019a: 214).

Apart from the development of road infrastructure, the people of Sabah also lack access to piped and clean water supply and only rely on

wells and rainwater catchment ponds as a source of water. Sabah is a very large state with mountainous terrains; hence, a large allocation is needed to provide piped water supply for all residents in the state. Commenting on this, Mahdzir Khalid (2021), the minister of rural development stated:

Sabah not only faces the problem of limited clean water supply coverage but also the condition of the pipes used that are old and damaged. Forty-five per cent of the pipes used to supply clean water in Sabah were built during British rule. Besides, treatment plants built in the 1960s are still in use, which can be detrimental. The ministry is aware of this and we are working with the state government to obtain accurate data to address this problem with allocation from the central government.

Apart from the basic infrastructure development, Sabah also lags in education and health development. In terms of education, 589 schools out of 1296 schools are poor schools with 91 classified as poor on a scale of seven, which is unsafe to occupy (Sabah Post 2020). This figure explains that 45.4 per cent of schools in Sabah are in poor condition with 15 per cent of them being unsafe to use due to the absence of sufficient allocation by the federal government for maintenance purposes. This situation has caused dissatisfaction among Sabahans since education is enshrined in Article 15 of the 20-point Agreement. However, through federal government policy, this autonomy has been taken over by the federal government, but the acquisition neglected the facilities that children should enjoy in schools.

Furthermore, the lack of technological tools and internet access to allow students to follow online classes also brought anger to the people of Sabah. The Sabah Director of Education reported that 52 per cent of students in Sabah do not have access to the internet, smartphones, computers or any mobile devices to enable them to pursue online learning (Borneo Post Online 2020). The lack of internet access and the inability of students to own technological tools such as computers and mobile devices have widened the education gap between Sabah and other states. This neglect has given rise to the anti-federal sentiment among the people of Sabah.

On top of that, inadequate medical facilities are also a development problem faced by the people of Sabah. Kota Belud MP, Isnaraissah Munirah stated that the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the gap between health facilities in Sabah and the Peninsula with the condition of hospital beds made out of old wood and iron beds without wheels. This has made it difficult

for hospital staff to change the position of beds during a pandemic situation (Malaysiakini 2020). The ratio of doctors to population for the state of Sabah is the highest in Malaysia, which is 1: 856 people compared to Kelantan with 1: 757, Kedah with 1: 680, Terengganu with 1: 595 and Sarawak 1: 662. The ratio of doctors to population is more than the national ratio of 1: 530 (Kementerian Kesihatan 2019). This shortage of manpower coupled with the size and challenging geography has made it difficult for the people of Sabah to get the best health services like other states and raised anti-federal sentiment among the people of Sabah as they felt that the federation was unfair and discriminated against them by giving priority in terms of development to the Peninsula over Sabah.

#### SOCIO-ECONOMIC GAP

The socio-economic gap between Sabah and other states has also led to the emergence of anti-federal sentiment among the people of Sabah. Although the federal government has introduced several policies to bridge this socio-economic gap such as the New Economic Policy (NEP), National Development Policy (DPN) 1991-2000 and Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (WKB2030), these policies failed to show positive socio-economic changes to Sabah, which in fact, seeing a bigger gap.

This gap can be seen in the household per capita income, which shows that Sabah's average per capita income for 2019 is RM5745 compared to Sarawak with RM5959, Penang with RM7774, Johor with RM8013, Federal Territory with RM12840 and Selangor with RM13,257. Although this position is not the lowest, it is still below the national average per capita income line of RM7901 (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia 2020a). Furthermore, two districts in Sabah, namely Tongod and Pitas, are among the 10 districts with the lowest average per capita income in Malaysia (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia 2020a). In answering the question of why these two districts have low per capita income, Salleh Said (2021) explained:

These regions are far inland and lack infrastructure development. Development must be provided in advance to allow the people in these rural areas to increase their income. Without road facilities, the villagers are unable to market their products to the public, which results in their low income.

In terms of poverty, Sabah has been ranked the poorest state in Malaysia. In 2019, the absolute



poverty rate in Sabah was 19.5 per cent, followed by Kelantan with 12.4 per cent and Sarawak with 9.0 per cent, much higher than the national average of 5.6 per cent. Other states include Melaka with 3.1 per cent, Selangor with 1.2 per cent, Federal Territory with 0.2 per cent, and Johor with 3.9 per cent (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia 2020a). This high poverty factor has caused frustration and anger among the people of Sabah towards the federation. This is because Sabah is not a poor state. In 2019, Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was RM1,510,693 million with Sarawak as the third-highest contributor with a value of RM149,724 million and Sabah in the fifth place with a value of RM98,883 million. Sarawak has contributed 9.9 per cent to the country's GDP followed by Sabah with 6.5 per cent (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia 2020a). Although Sabah's GDP is high, its people's income is still low. This suggests that the people of Sabah were kept away from enjoying the economic results of their state, even though their state is one of the highest contributors to the national economy. For the people of Sabah, this poverty is due to the neglect and discrimination of development by the federation against Sabah. This factor later triggered danger, dissatisfaction and frustration of the people of Sabah towards the federal government and ultimately created hatred towards the federation.

#### THE ISSUE OF OIL ROYALTY INCREASE CLAIMS

The issue of oil royalties is also a significant issue causing the dissatisfaction of the people of Sabah with the federal government. This is because Sabah is a major producer of petroleum and gas in Malaysia. Crude oil reserves in 2017 for the Peninsula were 1.669 billion barrels, 1.290 billion barrels for Sabah, and 1.767 billion barrels for Sarawak. Meanwhile, natural gas reserves in the same year displayed the Peninsula with a total of 25.659 Trillion Standard Cubic Feet (TSCF), Sabah with 12.547 TSCF, and Sarawak with 692 TSCF (Malaysia Energy Statistic Handbook 2018). The oil and natural gas industry categorised in the mining and quarrying sector contributed 26.9 per cent to Sarawak's GDP and 26.4 per cent to Sabah's GDP. Apart from that, Sabah is also a major producer of crude palm oil with 5.03 million tonnes in 2019 (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia 2020b). Ironically, the state is still far behind in terms of infrastructure and socio-economic development.

In Sabah, the demand for oil royalties dates back to the era of PBS's rule. Sabah leaders

at the time felt that they did not receive a fair distribution of development allocations from the federal government (Mohammad Agus 2006). This situation caused the Sabah government to demand their rights, including asking for the oil royalty to be increased. The demand for an increase in oil royalties was also made by the WARISAN government to the federal government after GE-14 by forming a special committee to refine matters related to oil royalty claims to the federal government. Sabah Chief Minister, Shafie Afdal stated that the state government is adamant to demand a 20 per cent oil royalty until it can be realised, which is based on gross profit (Utusan Borneo Online 2018).

The demand for the increased royalty was due to the backward development of Sabah, less economic activity and low socioeconomic, as well as high poverty although Sabah is rich in oil and natural gas. This situation has caused the people of Sabah to feel angry and hateful towards the federation, similar to what happened in the Alberta and Saskatchewan provinces of Canada when these provinces were dissatisfied with having to share their natural resource wealth with other provinces. As happened in Canada, the conflict of claims also occurred in Sabah leading to the emergence of anti-federal sentiment among the people in the state.

#### THE ISSUE OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

Illegal immigrants (pendatang tanpa izin—PTI) also become a factor that raises anti-federal sentiments of Sabahans towards the federal government. The presence of many PTIs worries Sabah's people, especially Sabah's largest ethnic group, the Kadazan Dusun Murut (KDM). This is because PTIs bring social problems, security and economic competition to the local community. Apart from that, the most important thing for the KDM community is that PTIs can influence the victory of the party contesting in the election.

The issuance of identity cards by the federal government to illegal immigrants is an aspect that worries the people of Sabah, which took place on a massive scale during the era of PBS rule aimed at defeating the PBS government. These identity cards were given to Filipino Muslim refugees to enable them to vote for BN victory (Zulakha 2013). In September 2018, the Sabah Director of Immigration reported that one-third of the 1.2 million of Sabah's 3.9 million residents were illegal immigrants, of which only 30 per cent have valid documents (Tracy 2018). The presence of PTIs worries the people of

Sabah, especially when the number of Filipino and Indonesian immigrants became more than part of the original population of Sabah.

The presence of PTIs has angered the people of Sabah to the federal government. This is because the power of border control and to issue identity cards are in the hands of the central government. Explaining the reasons for the anger of the people of Sabah towards PTI, Salleh Said (2021) stated:

PTIs are an issue in Sabah as their presence brings many problems. Among them is the increase in criminal activities such as theft, robbery, rape, murder, drugs and kidnapping. In addition, PTIs also bring problems with housing, health, employment, hygiene and disease. Therefore, the people of Sabah do not feel comfortable and safe even in their own place.

Apart from that, the people of Sabah were also worried about the presence of PTIs as these immigrants can determine the victory of the parties contesting in the election. In the 16<sup>th</sup> state election in 2020, this issue was widely used by the contesting parties. The anti-PTI message was so strong that it affected Sabah voters' rejection of the WARISAN Plus government, especially in the KDM constituency. Another reason for WARISAN's rejection is that WARISAN president Shafie Afdal has close ties with Mahathir Mohammad who is responsible for changing Sabah's demographics through the 'Mahathir Project' identity card project (Vinashini & Aslam 2021: 127). Strong anti-Mahathir sentiment in Sabah caused Mahathir to fail to campaign in the Sabah PRN-16 for fear of influencing voters' support for WARISAN Plus (The Star 2020).

Although the Sabah government has been trying to solve this problem, the state government cannot do anything as it does not have the power in this matter without cooperation and action from the central government. The failure of the central government to resolve this crisis has caused anti-federal groups to arouse anti-federal sentiment and create xenophobia in the people of the state against the federation. This anti-federal sentiment is a danger to Sabah's political stability. In addition, it also had a huge impact on Malaysia's political stability, as evaluated in the next section.

#### THE IMPACT OF ANTI-FEDERAL SENTIMENT ON MALAYSIAN POLITICS

The federation's attitude of disrespecting MA63 and discriminating against Sabah's autonomy rights has

given rise to anti-federal sentiment in Sabah and impacted Malaysian politics.

The first effect is the strained relationship between the federal government and the state of Sabah. This is because the federal government decided to punish Sabah by putting pressure, interfering in state administration, restricting financial assistance and creating federal departments to coordinate federal allocations in Sabah when the state leaders demanded their rights as contained in MA63. These actions forced the Sabah government to submit to the wishes of the federal government holding the financial power.

Although Sabah was subjected to the federal government, the political tsunami that occurred in the 12<sup>th</sup> general election (GE) has changed this landscape. In the GE-12, the BN, which ruled at the central level, failed to achieve a two-thirds majority victory, forcing them to rely on the support of Sabah and Sarawak to stay in power. This opportunity was taken by the governments of Sabah and Sarawak to claim their autonomy rights as promised in MA63. Sabah and Sarawak have also demanded development rights that have been ignored by the federal government. As an example, the Sabah government had urged the federal government to increase oil royalties to 20 per cent (Yap 2019) owing to the importance of the royalty to Sabah for covering the costs of development needed by the state. The state government's force and pressure on the federal government have resulted in strained relations between the federal government and Sabah. Explaining the impact of tense centre-state relations, minister in the Prime Minister's Department (parliament and law), Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar (2022) who was interviewed stated:

The centre cannot help the state much as the state government refuses to cooperate with the central government. As a result, state development was hindered since many central government projects that require state cooperation such as land could not be implemented. Second, politics became unstable from the strained relations that disrupted the harmony of society. Most importantly, it aroused the hatred of the people of the state towards the central government, which is not good for the survival of our federation.

The second impact brought by anti-federal sentiment is that it had torn down the federal system. In the case of Sabah, this sentiment has created anti-federal groups with the desire for self-government. Nevertheless, this movement is not a new thing in Sabah. In the USNO meeting on 23 April 1975, Tun Mustapha circulated a memorandum on *The future*

of Sabah's position in Malaysia, which questioned whether Sabah should remain in Malaysia or govern itself like Singapore (Mohammad Agus 2002). The issue was raised because the special powers enjoyed by Sabah in MA63 were taken back by the federal government. In the era of the PBS government, the arrest of Dr Jeffrey Kitingan in 1991 under the ISA was also linked to his attempts to bring Sabah out of the Federation of Malaysia (Mohammad Agus 2006: 293).

The anti-federal sentiment later led to the formation of anti-federal groups with the goal of taking Sabah out of the Malaysian federation. The Sabah Sarawak Keluar Malaysia (SSKM) group is an anti-federal group that has openly demanded self-government for Sabah and Sarawak since its inception in 2011. The establishment of the SSKM group has had a domino effect on the emergence of other anti-federal groups such as Sabah for Sabahan (S4S), the United Kingdom and Sabah Sarawak Rights Australia New Zealand (SSRANZ) that fight for autonomy rights of Sabah and Sarawak (Peter 2018).

The third effect is the fading of patriotism and nationalism spirit of the people of Sabah towards the Federation of Malaysia. In the state of Sabah, the celebration of Malaysian Independence Day on 31 August has been replaced with the Sabah Day celebration to commemorate the announcement of Sabah's independence from the British. This celebration has become an annual celebration event by anti-federal groups aimed at creating awareness of Sabah's independence from British occupation (Borneo Post Online 2017). For example, in the Sabah Day celebration held in Kampung Kaiduan Papar on 31 August 2019, this group demanded the federal and state governments not to fly the Jalur Gemilang flag during the Merdeka celebration on 31 August. For this group, the Jalur Gemilang flag only needs to be flown on September 16 to commemorate the establishment of Malaysia (Borneo Post Online 2019). This indicates that the emergence of anti-federal sentiment in Sabah has also removed the spirit of patriotism of the people of Sabah towards Malaysian federalism.

The fourth effect is that these sentiments threatened the harmony and unity of the country. Although the harmony and unity among the people of Sabah were previously the best and often used as an example, this harmony and unity began to be disrupted when the emergence of anti-federal groups influenced and incited the people to hate the federal

government. For example, to achieve the goal of self-government, SSKM has launched online and manual petitions to gain the support of the people of Sabah. Commenting on this, Syed Saddiq (2021), former youth and sports minister who is now the president of the MUDA party stated:

The petitions and referendums made by this anti-federal group have divided the people of Sabah. The group's action to gain support is a provocation to the people of Sabah to oppose the federation. The impact of this sentiment has threatened the harmony and unity enjoyed by Malaysians so far. In addition, it also challenges the constitution and national security. This group must be stopped immediately as it threatens the harmony of the people of Sabah as well as the survival of Malaysian federalism.

The fifth effect of this anti-federal sentiment is the rise of state nationalism that threatens the stability of Malaysia as a federal state. In Sabah, the slogan Sabah for Sabahan is used by local parties to gain the support of the people in the election. For instance, this slogan was used by WARISAN to attract the support of the people of Sabah in GE-14 (Romzi et al. 2021: 75). As a result, the people of Sabah supported the WARISAN since they saw it fighting for the interests of the state just as they supported PBS in 1985 (Chin 2018: 177). In this GE, WARISAN won eight parliamentary seats while the local party Star won one seat. At the state level, WARISAN won the most seats with 21 seats. This shows that anti-federal sentiment has seen Sabahans' tendency to choose local parties that fight for Sabah's interests (Chin 2019b).

The spirit of state nationalism peaked with the emergence of anti-federal groups. For this group, the spirit of Malaysian nationalism is no longer relevant as Sabah will become a free and independent country. The Sabah people's priority on the interests of the state without thinking about the country has impacted the spirit of Malaysian federalism. Power-sharing, which is the principle of federalism, can no longer be carried out properly since the emergence of anti-federal sentiments made the people of Sabah refuse to be governed by leaders who failed to understand their aspirations, needs and wants.

## CONCLUSION

This article has discussed five factors that led to the emergence of anti-federal sentiment among the people of Sabah. Such factors include their dissatisfaction with the implementation of autonomy

rights and MA63, imbalances in infrastructure development, socioeconomic gaps, payment of oil royalties, the issues of illegal immigrants as well as security issues. This dissatisfaction gave rise to anti-federal groups that spread anti-federal sentiment in Sabah. As a result, the people of Sabah began to lose faith in the federation. These anti-federal groups not only demanded MA63 and the right to autonomy from the federation but acted to demand the right to self-government and separation from the Malaysian federation.

The findings of this analysis have illustrated that the anti-federal sentiment in Sabah has had an impact on Malaysian federalism including the conflict between the central government and Sabah, the demand for self-government, the fading spirit of patriotism, the threat of national harmony and unity, hence evoking the spirit of statehood of the people of Sabah that hinders the spirit of nationalism. Such an impact can destroy Malaysia's sovereignty. Looking at the serious impact on Malaysian federalism, immediate steps need to be taken by the federal government to address this impact.

In its final part of analysis, this article proved that anti-federal sentiment is not just political rhetoric played by politicians but a real sentiment felt by the people of Sabah as a result of the federal government's actions that deny, ignore and act unfairly toward the people in the state.

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