

## A RACE TO THE FRONTIER: INVOKING PERIPHERAL TERRITORIES - CASE OF SABAH AS A REGIONAL PLAYER

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### ABSTRACT

*This article explores how Sabah could utilise its geopolitical advantages and its challenges in doing so. Through a constructivist lens, this paper attempts to unravel Sabah's historical and social realities, whereby this will be complemented with a Foucauldian discourse analysis to deconstruct Sabah's dynamic relationship with its colonial British masters and subsequently with the federal government of Malaysia. This is placed in the backdrop of Sabah's many counterparts in the region as a "peripheral territory", which had similar pre- and post-colonial era experiences which resulted in the imposition of significant challenges from the lack of right to self-determination to form an identity, lack of formal governing system structure, and in the present day, the lack of autonomy that Sabah has been so long fighting for.*

**Keywords:** Sabah, devolution, autonomy, periphery, federal-state relations, governmentality, power

### INTRODUCTION

Niccolò Machiavelli's seminal advice for "The Prince" in consolidating a holistic hold on conquered territories is to go and live amongst the conquered and administer them personally. This was the approach taken by Alexander the Great in maintaining his fledgling empire in the aftermath of his Persian and Sogdian campaigns - maintaining a cohesive relationship between the frontier and the centre of power through understanding regional contexts and appropriating certain levels of decentralisation as prescriptions employed in consolidation. How would these applications of statesmanship assist in defining the state of Sabah's role in the Federation of Malaysia?

The Borneo State of Sabah can be seen as the quintessential peripheral territory within the Federation. From a geographical context, it is the furthest from the seat of power in Putrajaya. It also occupies a special position as the homeland to a myriad of ethnic groups not native to the Malayan peninsula where the Federal government convenes. It also possesses a historical chronology that has, to an extent, been insulated from the developments of its counterparts on the Malayan peninsula. Similar linguistic sensibilities are the binding thread between Borneo and the Peninsula, yet this can be argued to be superficial.

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Furthermore, it was one of the latest territories added to the Federation of Malaysia. Geographically speaking, it is positioned at a tremendous distance from the administrative capital, viably accessible mostly by air and maritime transportation - situating itself at the periphery of Malaysia's borders. Conjuring not just an image of physical distance but also one of administrative priorities diluted by such distance. This is illustrated by Sabah's growing pains since its induction into the Federation with imbalances in developmental initiatives compared to West Malaysia despite its economic contributions to the Federation owing to its wealth of natural resources. Given this disconnection, a derivation of an archetypical trickster (being the political elites in the Federal government) arises, whereby the former engages in manipulation of the gullible whose innate potential is not made aware. However, this illusion has not been able to sustain itself as corrective development of this disconnect has manifested in a slow but growing sentiment of self-determination and nationalism. To which these sentiments have recently been stirred by several individuals for political expediency which has led to a sharp rise in anti-federal sentiments. These notions, however, are not exclusive to Sabah, rather, the ongoing struggle for peripheral representation has also been echoed in Malaysia's neighbors in the Southern Philippines, and the Kalimantan region in Indonesia among others. Coincidentally, these peripheral zones are located close to the Makassar Straits and the Celebes Sea, key areas which possess an extensive commercial history.

With Indonesia slowly shifting its focus to developing the peripheral Kalimantan region (although not as peripheral in the geographic sense as Timor, Sumatra and Sulawesi, its developmental infrastructure leaves much to be desired in comparison to the Java heartland), it would be accompanied by uplifting its economic disposition and push it as a regional hub. Moving to administer the frontier personally with a new capital city is a move agreeable to Machiavelli's notions. This will be accompanied by a mass migration of government staff and their families which will require setting up other supporting industries and infrastructure. With an estimated dedicated allocation of USD\$32 billion, it would stand to reason that further allocation will be provided to its satellite cities such as Samarinda and Balikpapan (Tehsin, 2021), the latter being an important financial centre in Kalimantan as a functioning port city servicing the Makassar Strait which will be enhanced in meeting the new developments within the region as a premier maritime city (Adjie, 2020).

Malaysia stands a chance to cultivate a regional hub by empowering peripheral Sabah. Yet, it needs not follow the approach of appropriating centres of power as Indonesia is undergoing, or how Alexander the Great decided to shift his power base to Babylon. Doing so would be superfluous. Rather, innovation in governmental administrative capacities, and displacing the top-down hierarchical structure of exercising power to the lower level or in this context, the peripheral territories would be the apt prescription.

In the Foucauldian sense, a deconstruction of the essence of current governmentality to broker an arrangement that allows power-knowledge to be disseminated to the civil level would be apt - providing wider participation for civil society to self-govern itself, embracing Foucault's advanced neo-liberal notions of governmentality. Sabah has been marred with a half-century old dilemma in trying to

acquire a measure of autonomy through the promises made during and after the decolonisation efforts by the British Empire to guide its enterprises. This has set the trajectory for which Sabah may appeal to governmentality and self-governance within a region yearning for such prospects. This could potentially place the state as a success story for peripheral development.

This paper will focus on Sabah's geostrategic realities, how it can derive key advantages from its position, how it can secure itself with sufficient capacity to do so, and how achieving such an aim can fuel the region into a productive hub. This would require devolution of powers from the Federal government to the Sabah state government. Underpinning this argument would be the brewing local sentiment on Sabah for the need for enhanced autonomy to cultivate its capacities. By doing so it can stand to strengthen its position and influence as a regional hub within the spatial context of the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) umbrella.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper will approach the topic of devolution and Sabah's political history through a methodology that relies largely on a body of literature that focuses on theoretical presuppositions. This is coupled with other relevant literature that has covered Sabah's political landscape throughout its pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial history. This would ensure a chronology of events that has shaped Sabah into the entity that it is today from a socio-political perspective. Furthermore, utilising press statements and other relevant speeches made by policy makers would add color into the attitudes and behaviours that can assist in unraveling Sabah's political climate. Although empirical evidence that demonstrates the attitudes the Sabahan population holds regarding devolution would assist in clearing any doubt on the popularity of such a notion, this would prove to be difficult at this current time. Should any researcher tries to pursue such an endeavor, it would firstly require a substantial sample size that considers geographic dispositions of the respondents, what ethnic background they come from, and economic standing. Perhaps a big data analysis approach would be an apt recommendation in this respect.

With the lack of accessible empirical data sets to provide further context, this paper would seek to focus on laying down a basic framework to orient around the idea of devolution. Firstly, its theoretical pretext will rest upon a constructivist approach of international relations to render the cultural and political framework for which Sabah and the Malaysian Federal Government would operate in if the endeavour for devolution and empowerment of Sabah is to be undertaken. Instead of systemic theories such as neo-realism which hinges on an intangible structure of anarchy, constructivism allows a lens to view a historical, socio-cultural, and developmental chronology. "Anarchy is what the state makes of it" as constructivists will articulate, defining the state and its contemporaries as contingent. This system of analysis will be accompanied by Foucauldian notions of governmentality, as Foucauldian ideas focus on the articulation of power that will be unraveled through the constructivist application throughout this paper. Therefore,

constructivism will be utilised to shed light on the apparatus Sabah is operating within and Foucauldian governmentality to define the cleavages within this reality.

These tools will be utilised to underpin an investigation of the relationship between the Sabah state and the Federal Government of Malaysia. By understanding Sabah's position in the federation, it will allow clarity for possible remedies for devolution, and the paradigm shift of the administrative psyche needs to succeed in prescribing said remedies. This is due to the "domestic" nature of understanding Sabah's ascendancy as a periphery is contingent on its devolution from the federal government. This will be accompanied by a rationalisation for restructuring governmental inhibitions, a deconstruction of the *status quo*, and proposals to alternatives, rhetoric and theory for advanced liberal democratic techniques as espoused by Michel Foucault. By allowing wider participation of a territory viewed as neglected or exploited, it provides an opportune case study of how acquiescing power from the central power structure to the state level via devolution can result in a benefit for a country. By viewing Sabah's geostrategic advantages and how devolution will allow Sabah to tap into its potential, it could take on an exemplary role of devolution being an optimal course of action for other countries rife with national territories that display proclivities for more autonomy. This will be accompanied by a general outlook at how this will also benefit the federation in incentivising devolution.

## **THEORETICAL PRETEXT**

This paper positions itself within the constructivist banner of International Relations theory to serve as the framework to highlight key factors that have contributed to Sabah's modern environment, and Foucauldian governmentality as a supplementary prescription for Sabah's devolution. Briefly, constructivism proposes that the nature of the international system is influenced by historical and social interactions between states. Jackson and Sørensen's understanding adds depth by positing that international relations between states are a social construct drawn from the connections formed and maintained by states (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013, p. 209).

Within the context of Southeast Asian development, the many events that have shaped it into the numerous entities produced have already defined it as a product of its historical continuity. Constructivism would utilise historical events, evolving cultural attitudes and geopolitical realities as markers to which a polity would construct their identities over that bleeds into and affects behaviors of individuals and namely states in their interactions with other states. For Alexander Wendt, "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992, pp. 391-395). For Wendt, the interest of the state and its actors are determined by its anthropological and historical continuity, resulting in the creation of specific identities unique to the factors that have determined its outcome. And this carries forth during processes of state-formation and development of a state identity alongside its actors. Wendt was also quick to identify the salient conversation surrounding formation as a matter of nature or environmental factors. Yet this is underpinned with one identity-forming through its interaction with the other (Burchill, 2005, pp. 188-194). Wendt proposes:

*"...that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature."*

(Wendt, 1999, pp. 1-5).

One can argue that Sabah's identity has been constructed as a byproduct of colonial ambitions from the Sultanates of Brunei and Sulu to the colonial British and arguably the neo-colonial dispositions of the Federal Government of Malaysia. The manifestation of its colonial experience has bred an amalgamation of perspectives that Sabah is a product defined by these temporal episodes. By examining these perspectives, one would unravel a historical tapestry that is defined by nationalist tendencies, or at the very least, Sabahan autonomy being relegated to the background. Having these restrictions has resulted in an environment that is not conducive for Sabah to define its own path towards statecraft, rendering the Sabahan governmental structure at the arbitrary whims of the federal government. Nationalism has been met with an understanding as a modern theory beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Kohn, 1967, pp. 1-2). However, this takes the spirit of Western historiography which views history as a linear progression that moves from one period to another. Yet, we can observe that patterns tend to repeat themselves cyclically. This is to say a nationalist spirit resides in many unrelated communities awaiting the chance to articulate itself either through violence, or cultural celebration.

Case examples of nationalism have made salient emergences within the confines of history - zealot-led Jewish revolts in response to Roman imperialism revealed itself as a Hebrew community resisting occupation and loss of autonomy from a foreign aggressor culminating in decades of strife and warfare. This resulted in the mass exodus of the Jewish people, yet it did not diminish the nationalist spirit to see the Jewish state once again realised and being heavily articulated during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cultural expressions of nationalist articulation can also be seen in the revival of the Persian identity during the era of the Sassanid Dynasty. Nationalist roots growing in modern ecosystems can be seen in cases such as a unified German spirit emerging from the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars and Franco-Prussian wars which induced an experience of patriotic fervour to the state and national pride. Nationalism nonetheless induces a spirit or ideology or movement that seeks to promote the interest of a particular community or group of people holding the belief and right to self-determination without outside interference and seeks to further build a collective identity through various state-craft practices (Smith, 2010, pp. 25-30).

Therefore, any historical instance of a collective identity seeking to establish self-governance would suffice as historical nationalism and a source of pride for national identities. Johann Gottfried Herder took the case of the German people as a formal examination of nationalism (Adler, 2009, pp. 221-222). Presenting the notion that a national character is built upon cultural and linguistic elements cultivated throughout generations, for Germany, Herder cited that the elements of the Holy Roman Empire, despite experiencing paradigm shifts through conquest and dynastic occupation, still retained elements of "German" identity through a common linguistic and cultural heritage.

This shared “German” personality found within the microcosms of the Empire was able to crystallise into a unified spirit in the aftermath of the Napoleonic conquest of Prussia, which is where the modern German state would derive its genesis (Adler, 2009 pp. 221-222). And it is the German representative in Prussia that found itself characterised as an enduringly militant entity that has amalgamated with larger German society bleeding these sensibilities in the German psyche that resulted into cultural assertions of its militaristic roots to travel into the realm of romanticising cultural beliefs. Leaving behind a lasting legacy, a romantic celebration of a collective national identity, or rather “the celebration of the nation” (defined by its language, history, and cultural character) as an inspiring ideal for artistic expression; and the instrumentalisation of that expression in ways of raising political consciousness (Leerssen, 2013, p. 9). Hence, nationalism serves as a vehicle of encompassing feelings of belonging via cultural traditions, norms, and values which can be expressed in artistic art forms such as, art, music, cultural or national holidays, or even reverence for certain historical figures. For the French, they would look to figures such as Vercingetorix of the Gallic Arverni tribe or Charles Martel of the Franks as national heroes. The attachment of cultural pride to reverence of individuals also extends to Cyrus the Great, Shahanshah of Persia whose legacy has been subsumed into the national psyche of modern Iran as a great hero of the Iranian people, a characterisation of an upstanding Iranian. This explains the Pahlavi dynasty’s efforts to maintain legitimacy and bind the royal institution to a transcendental imagery of the great, ancient, and magnanimous Shahanshah of old (Merhavy, 2019, pp. 76-83). For the Malayan peninsula, the stories of Hang Tuah commanded the same level of respect and reverence into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries into modern Malaysia.

However, these precursors to nationalism were largely absent as Sabah’s tribes conducted themselves within the realm of continuity of culture and civilisation by passing it through the oral traditions (Appell, 2010, pp. 1-2, 10). This is in stark contrast to its contemporaries in West Malaysia which has maintained a written historical and cultural continuity through a body of preserved texts and a feudal system of governance that espoused the virtuous warrior King archetype which presented an embryonic blueprint for statecraft (Alatas, 1968, pp. 584-585). This laid a markedly distinct narrative of Sabah’s historical foundations from West Malaysia, regardless of possessing a shared linguistic background. With pre-colonial Sabah occupying a temporal position bereft of a solid historical continuity, this places it within an almost pre-historical status which would allow for easier propagation of the British or other colonial characters to inject their cultural dispositions within the region. Hence, there was a lack of consolidated “Sabahan” identity that was shared enough around the natives to be able to resist colonial influence.

Rather, the capitulations from tribal leaders as subordinates and understudies of the colonial Governors would prove to be enough for administrative purposes. It was only when the emergence of larger-than-life characters appeared at the forefronts of leadership, such as Donald Stephens and Tun Mustapha Harun, that there was tangible resistance to being relegated as just the governed (Alatas, 1968, pp 40-41). From this context, a freshly forged Sabahan consciousness was able to precipitate, one that has delineated vastly from cultural roots due to the lack of continuity. This is in stark contrast to the Indian experience

whereby institutions of native culture were not swept aside, leaving behind a solid foundation for cultural institutions to regain a second chance at revitalisation. In the Indian context, the post-colonial experience saw a revitalisation of the ancient histories that was used as a guide for nation-building, enshrining values drawn from its great works and cultural literature. (Panikkar, 2002, pp. 108-111). Pinpointing this reality of Sabah's lack of civilisational continuity and tribal dispositions is key to understanding how Sabahan communities did not have a tangible foundation of culture to stand up against more established modern forms of statecraft.

Sabah's bid for self-determination and resilience against an overarching entity vis-à-vis the Malaysian Federal Government, and seeking to restore its collective identity is encapsulated as a struggle that has been articulated as seeking to govern itself to its constructed identity. This is through channels of cultural semblance and identifying points of cultural osmosis between the numerous ethnic tribes present within Sabah. Within Foucauldian terms of governmentality and power, governmentality or "the art of governing", it implies the need to delegate certain administrative duties from the centre of power towards the governed which has a willingness to participate and act as an agent for political change. Rose and Miller's understanding of the term denotes that governmentality is:

*"...forms of power without a centre, or rather with multiple centres, power that was productive of meanings, of intervention, of entities, of processes of objects, of written traces and lives."*

(Bröckling, Krassman, Lemke, 2010, pp. 57-59).

In the context of this paper, the federal government shall be defined as the governing body that is conferred the ability to exercise disciplinary power (via institutions and its agents) and the governed being the population and the state government of Sabah, and through governmentality it implies that, it is dependent on the disposition of the governed to act in accordance with rationality and equitable representation.

Hence, the argument of Foucauldian governmentality is one whereby the strengthening of liberal democracies is a necessity to fortify resilience against temptations of exercising capricious use of sovereign and disciplinary power (Nadesan, 2008, p.16). Within the Sabahan context, the recurring episodes of nationalism and a call for a return of agency demonstrates a struggle for a neglected governed territory to become a greater participant. This was also expressed in the constructs of Sabah's history with many of its anthropological developments muted by power structures that sought to reduce its territory and people into a governed state and positions of the "governor" in the Foucauldian sense never came to fruition. For Foucault, the "governor" does not only translate to individuals occupying a place in the hierarchical power structure of government, but also individual citizens who would have autonomy over their individual sovereignty to conduct themselves as representatives of bringing needed change to their communities in an open and democratic manner. Thus, the ideals for which Foucault would describe governmentality were never achieved in Sabah's situation vis-à-vis its relationships with its governing masters. The relationship with Sabah and the federal government is also not withdrawn

from this attitude. Hence, by applying these theories, this paper will hope to understand Sabah's political architecture and use it to gauge the possibility of devolution with the goal of pursuing multilateral regional development by empowering peripheral Sabah.

## **SABAH - THE UNDERDOG**

Establishing Sabah's lack of a civilisational foundation relative to its Western counterparts would yield an observation that it did not unlock aspirations that incentivises a consolidation of collective Sabahan identity which forms the basis of nationalist articulation. However, it does possess a level of primordialism drawn from Clifford Geertz. Francis Loh who utilises this concept in understanding the Malaysian context writes:

*“Strong ineffable sentiments and attachments based on the social givens of human existence, like blood ties, kinship, tribe, race, language, dialect, religion, social customs, region, etc. For Geertz, primordialism is invoked to provide meaning and solace to ordinary people when their societies are undergoing rapid change. However, in multi-ethnic societies like Malaysia, primordialism can lead to a heightening of group consciousness and threaten the nation-building process. An ‘integrative revolution’ anchored in ‘civic politics’ is therefore required to prevent the break-up of the new nation. In this perspective, politics in plural or multi-ethnic societies are regarded to be fractured along ethnic lines, and ethnic-based communities with recognisable leaders, as well as common political interests and goals, quite naturally emerge. It follows that electoral politics, too, is presumed to be ethnically determined and that voters, invariably, vote along ethnic lines.”*

(Loh, 2009, p. xii)

Underpinning this sentiment is infallible to communities, and within the Sabahan context, a strong and primordial identity would emerge as a narrative to drive its historical trajectories. A precursor of nationalist identity stemming from primordial sentiment emerged during the sporadic riots against the British colonial administrators, yet it was only eventually articulated within the realm of politics during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, it still stands that an awakening of civic sensibility through the modernist perspective is a prerequisite for state-formation practices to go underway which, proven above, was not comprehensive enough under the British (Hefner, 2001, pp. 48-49).

Establishing this fact gives a concrete reality that Sabah itself was already poised to provide consent to an external power as its legitimate hegemon over the region itself. Understanding this context is imperative in unravelling the attitudes that have been constructed and how power was articulated from external powers over Sabah. This is proven during the episode of the merger to form the Federation of Malaysia. Prior to the merger, many Sabahan leaders were quick to give their thoughts on whether joining the Malayan Federation is an appropriate course of action in the wake of the United Kingdom's de-colonisation project in the aftermath of the Second World War. On Sabah's part, its leaders came to the consensus in the form of the 20-point agreement - a memorandum that would safeguard the interests and well-being of the Sabahan people (Human Rights Watch,



1991, pp. 33-36). Presented as a prayer for the future of Sabah, it would soon be incorporated into the 1963 Malaysian Agreement 1963 (MA63).<sup>1</sup>

Expanding this sequence of events would also reveal that Sabah has categorically consented to the merger on a conditional basis. Gaining self-governance from the British on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1963, effectively rendered it as a sovereign state that can negotiate at the international level. The factor of independence being associated with self-governance would also be highlighted in the full wording of MA63 which is “the Agreement relating to Malaysia between United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Federation of Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore”. From this, Sabah was seen as a sovereign nation and due respect to this moment in history should be appropriated. And it is within this agreement that it would set an infallible precedent to how Sabah is able to govern its own affairs free from interference guaranteed under this agreement. Yet, throughout the proceeding decades political machinations had eroded these promises which had caused a corrective effort on Sabahan leaders to bring forth to the mainstream political narrative, calling for reviews into the agreement for an amicable resolution to a perception of a lost autonomy that was promised (Strangio, 2021). This erosion is made evident when examining the methods employed by the Malaysian Federal Government throughout its interactions with Sabah.

Witnessing the historical context of Sabah in its chronological form unveils numerous occasions of federal interference and the attempts of the Barisan Nasional (BN) government led by UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) to subtly place themselves or their subordinates into the corridors of power within Sabah through patronage politics or by coercion of local leaders. Despite the presence of a tribal primordial sentiment standing to counter such interference located within tribal Sabah, its rhetoric was mostly articulated through strongman characters such as Tun Mustapha and Donald Stephens.<sup>2</sup> Yet these larger-than-life figures ended up having to surrender a degree of autonomy and consent to many of the federal government’s demands as demonstrated. The former inevitably surrendering himself into a subordinate position poised to be an actor of the machinations of the federal government despite his fierce contestations for more oil royalty rights of up to 30% (Luping, 2007). This was followed up by elite decision-makers in Kuala Lumpur furthering their integrative processes to maintain Sabah within a subservient position. What could be ascertained from these sporadic dances of capitulation is a consistent trend of Sabah and its tribal dispositions failing to resist “colonialisation”, both from the British and to a large extent the Federal Government of Malaysia, by swaying over staunch opposition leaders over to the ruling regime of BN.<sup>3</sup>

Post-independence resistance from the primacy of the federal government and the BN coalition would prove difficult throughout the history of the federation as it possessed the mandate of leadership from Malayan independence in 1957 up until 2018. The realities presented throughout the political arena of late 20<sup>th</sup> century Sabah can be emphasised as a tug of war between salient cries for more powers to be granted under the auspices of the 20-point agreement and MA63. Hence, the decade of the 1960s ushered in a wave of negotiations, re-negotiations and demonstrating the cracks in the arrangement between the federal government and Sabahan leaders. The 1970s however were characterised with a

recalcitrant yet, ideologically aligned (aligned with the UMNO decision makers at the time) Tun Mustapha who aggrandized himself and the faith of Islam at the expense of local dispositions which possessed a significantly non-Muslim population,<sup>4</sup> sparking a new divide along religious lines which added a new dimension of difficulty to Sabah's attainment for Foucauldian governmentality (Keng, 2002, pp. 61-63).

Yet, this did not dull continued resistance from Sabah's leaders throughout the 1980s and 1990s. On the contrary, a corrective backlash was slowly taking root with the tenure of Harris Salleh as Chief Minister. Harris Salleh was thrust into the mantle of leadership after Donald Stephens mysteriously perished in a plane crash coincidentally alongside other state officials (Bernard, Sta Mari, 1978, pp. 7-20). Characterised as a milquetoast leader that found hardship in stifling Federal aspirations, it laid the groundwork for new political parties to take the reins of articulating Sabah's autonomy, with Salleh placed as Chief Minister and being answerable to the federal government in hopes of appeasement considering the dividends the federal government has come to expect from supporting their candidates into the positions of leadership of Sabah.

However, frustration over Salleh's leadership led to stark criticism which catalysed a renewal of nationalist sentiment born from objection towards the current arrangements emanating from Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) under Joseph Pairin Kitingan. (Chin, 1994, pp. 905-906). With PBS's meteoric ascent as the prime representatives of the local ethnic Kadazandusun population, the BN coalition had co-opted Tun Mustapha to challenge PBS from attaining supremacy and an impenetrable foothold that would allow themselves a favourable bargaining position vis-à-vis West Malaysia. Yet, this too, inevitably resulted in being absorbed into the BN machinery.<sup>5</sup>

From the perspective of constructivism, it can be argued that Sabah's subservient nature towards the federal government has been constructed through the numerous instances of colonialism by foreign powers, and through coercive tactics of patronage politics where the governor would offer the governed through a "you help me, I help you" arrangement. The BN elites were able to persuade leaders into a position of subordination regardless of their gravitas and energy, gathering the foundations and groundwork for institutions being uplifted in Sabah favouring the frameworks already established in West Malaysia – such as institutions that spread Islam, which was a binding agent utilised by the UMNO regime and trickled down through Tun Mustapha and Harris Salleh, the former not exactly entwined, but maintained the same ideological zeal, and the latter possessing both characteristics of obedience and fervour.<sup>6</sup>

Given the historical background of subservience to both the British and the Malaysian Federal government, Sabah was constantly bombarded with foreign ambitions that suppressed its innate primordialism from evolving into nationalist rhetoric which remained exclusive to a few leaders that stood out, the failure of which resulted in a lack of a strong cultural foundation and framework to resist such ambitions. It also allowed easy access for federal machinations to penetrate and establish the groundworks for hegemony which only expanded gradually over the decades since 1963. Foucault will attribute this through an exercise of sovereign power where the state enforces its will to an absolute

degree and disciplinary power, whereby Sabah and its leaders were conditioned to act in a certain way so as not to earn the ire of the federal government. Lest the BN government will amass its resources to effectively distribute to shift political results in their favour. In essence, governmentality of Sabah has been inhibited by the lack of will from the federal government to allow for the governed Sabah to act of its accord via the rationalities of autonomy that its leaders have articulated for. This blockade to governmentality continued to face further locks and seals in the constitutional amendment on August 27, 1976 of Article 1(2) which reads:

*“The States of the Federation shall be Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Sabah, Sarawak, Selangor and Terengganu.”*

*When Malaysia was formed on Sept 16, 1963, it read: “The States of the Federation shall be – (a) the States of Malaya, namely, Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor and Terengganu; and (b) the Borneo States, namely, Sabah and Sarawak; and (c) the State of Singapore.”*

(Wong Chin Huat, 2019)

For political analyst Wong Chin Huat, he described this issue as follows:

*“Why is the arrangement of states so important? Because it determines if Sabah and Sarawak should be treated as equal to Malaya as a whole, or just equal to its 11 states. In other words, are Sabah and Sarawak each one of three regions in Malaysia, or 1 of 13 states?”* (Huat, 2019)

For Wong Chin Huat, these amendments grapple with the essential components that make up Malaysia. It was to be understood during the formation that Sabah would enter as an entity that is removed from the other states in the peninsular and be categorised into its own taxonomy alongside Sarawak. For the Warisan government that assumed power in 2018, the pursuit of the amendment would be utilised to plot a corrective course to bring Sabah back to its position removed from the other states. By re-introducing the distinction, it would hope to build a framework to better negotiate the case for Sabah’s autonomy (Bernama, 2019).<sup>7</sup>

Yet, this was still met with significant opposition due to reasonings that it was not comprehensive enough to meet the needs and aspirations that were consolidated into the Warisan government during the elections (Carvalho, Sivanandam, Rahim, Tan, 2019). It was met with a cynical scepticism that it would not yield a conducive enough change and was rather a window dressing to secure voters and maintain power. Yet, it did gain some inroads with parliamentary debates bearing witness to the formation of a select committee with members from the Sarawakians and Sabahans alongside federal bureaucrats to assist in consultation alongside the Prime Minister as Chair for this special committee (Aziz, 2019).

Regardless, the expression of brewing nationalism emerging from Sabah's leaders throughout recent years can be seen as a solid emergence of Sabahan identity ready to articulate itself for devolution, or at the very least decentralisation, congruent to the promises made during the formation of the Federation. What can be said for the future trajectories for Sabah is that further civic engagement is a necessity to further ferment the spirit of Sabahan nationalism. Attributing to Sabah's nebulous reality and the historical fact of not being cultivated through a properly consolidated tradition as many other civilisations had, it only is able to rely on its oral traditions and folklore passed down from generation to generation. A discussion revolving around the Sabahan identity for Sabahans is imperative in determining its place within the Federation. This would counteract the emerging narrative of secession, a risky enterprise that would bring about more harm than good for Sabah's well-being. Better efficacy can be found in placing the right civil intellectuals within positions that allows direct coordination with Federal bodies and representatives for a holistic arrangement that can potentially realign the current conditions of governor-governed relations.

As it stands, the hegemonic influences of the federal government on Sabah is far-reaching and has sunk deep within the soil of Sabah, requiring not a brute force approach due to the taxing nature of mass mobilisation, but re-assessing the social landscape to uncover more than what the federal has touched - which is possibly the tip of the iceberg. The seeds for a conducive sense of nationalism are present, yet channeling it for civil society leaves much to be desired as it is still circumscribed into the domains of politicians and leaders. It would be apt to deduce that federal-state relations rests on a very precarious balance requiring the federal government to navigate properly through the quagmire that federal machinations have set up throughout its interactions. Confidence building and capacity building measures would yield better results so long as representatives act within the principle of 'conduct of conduct' as Foucault will have it to maintain a semblance of harmony and balance. It is by channeling such a succinct spirit that is present and will continue to grow will it provide the necessary environment for Sabah's governmentality.

Drawing from the colonial experience of Delhi whereby the imperialist drive for profit and exploitation resulted in an indifferent attitude to native sentiment, the colonial episode was marked with rising tensions for representation and unhinging economic stringency on the native populace. The response came not from just negotiations at the political level, but saw an emergence of civil activity from members of the press to the individual sphere with tangible articulation such as reclaiming native spaces for native use (Legg, 2007, pp.151-152). The resulting reply by the Raj's representative sought to inculcate an attitude of rationality, upstanding dutiful conduct and cultivate a functional governing structure. In Delhi's process of governmentality, it would parallel the nationalist sentiment on Sabah with a surge of youth organisations focusing on governance, autonomy, and cultural revival. Mirroring the colonial Delhi experience, the application of pressure would be necessary albeit indirect for the instrumentality of Sabah's autonomy. This does come with a caveat that Sabah's governed population is ready to take on the reins of leadership and the agency associated with autonomy. Foucault's introspective prescriptions of governmentality hinge on aspects of advanced neo-liberal democratic sensibilities and

this requires legitimate institutions that encourage rationality and moral conduct to which the governed can orient their lives productively.

## **INVOKING PERIPHERAL ASCENT**

Taking into consideration Sabah's would be devolution in a pivotal moment when Indonesia seeks to increase its capacities in the Kalimantan region via the development of a new capital city, Sabah, if allowed the blessing to conduct its own affairs in development that is parallel and organic with the new city, can reap new dividends for both the Sabah state and the Federal government, should favorable governmentality succeed. This has already been carried out within the capacity of the Sabah state government (Vanar, 2021). Seeking to harness the potential spillover effect from the new capital city, the development of land linkages between Sabah and the Kalimantan region is imperative. This is a move that is arguably a prerequisite for Sabah to tap into potential benefits as quoted by Rafiq Idris:

*“Road connectivity is important as it has the potential of helping Sabah’s exporters and producers due to larger market size and lower logistics cost. It will help improve Sabah’s small and medium enterprises and encourage investment and downstream activities, among others. I believe that the road link to Kalimantan must be built. Only then will Sabah have the potential to enjoy the effects of this relocation significantly. It is a win-win situation for both Sabah and Kalimantan.”*

(The Star, 2019)

*“Among the big ones include the ASEAN Summit which was first held in Bali Indonesia in 1976, ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) Agreement signed in 1992, Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-the Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) formed in 1994, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) established in 1994, ASEAN +3 in 1997, ASEAN-China Summit in 1997, ASEAN+6 or also known as East Asia Summit where the first meeting held in 2005 and the recent initiative known as ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) among others.”*

(BNN Journalist, 2019)

This presents an opportunity for Sabah to not only tap into economic opportunities, but also develop its inherent economic advantages in terms of resources to assist in supporting the development of Kalimantan harnessing a relationship of synergy. The opportunity to allow Sabah to articulate itself further than making use of an approved budget from federal agencies can open up new avenues to tap into other fiscal means for development autonomous of federal approval. Enhancing Sabah's capabilities can result in widening the resource pool with added value manufacturing industries that make use of Sabah's resources. This in turn will also widen the pool of profitability that the federal government can tap into. Instead of stringent exploitation of a limited variety of raw resources, investing in manufacturing industries can open up a wider variety of value-added products that can provide a competitive edge in the domestic markets.

This also extends to the international sphere, bilaterally speaking the relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia and its foreign relations has experienced interactions that have ranged from lukewarm to amicable, given their shared cultural and linguistic roots. This relationship can also be viewed from the perspective of Borneo which is currently divided by 3 sovereign entities with the states of Sabah and Sarawak as parts of The Federation of Malaysia, Kalimantan under the Republic of Indonesia and Brunei being the only sovereign entity in Borneo.

Notable flashpoints within the Borneo sphere have been the ‘Konfrontasi’ incident when Indonesia was opposed to the merger between Sabah and Sarawak with Malaya to form the federation (Mackie, 1974, pp. 36-37). Sabah positioned in the Northern part of Borneo shares a land border with Kalimantan to the southeast and a maritime border in the Celebes Sea. This shared border would serve as the theatre for one of Malaysia and Indonesia’s prominent maritime disputes over the island of Sipadan and Ligitan which was decided in the International Court of Justice to be awarded to Malaysia based on “effective occupation” (ICJ, 2021). This has also been the cause of on and off tension between the governments of Malaysia and Indonesia. However, with the shift of Indonesia’s capital city to Kalimantan, it would be logical to assume that there would be more administrative deliberations on the part of Indonesia in becoming more involved in Kalimantan’s affairs that would potentially impact Sabah in some shapes or forms.

However, despite tensions flaring sporadically, in recent years there have been efforts focused on maintaining healthy relations between the two countries, Sabah’s engagements with Indonesia are also a facet that can be tackled independently as a subject of its own. For example, in 2019 then Chief Minister Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal led a delegation of 56 people on a goodwill visit to the East Kalimantan capital of Balikpapan to meet with Governor Isran Noor and discuss ways to improve their neighborly relations. The following statement was issued as a result of the visit:

*“We are of one culture and origin. We need to nurture not only the kinship between Indonesia and Malaysia, but also with East Kalimantan – which remains close and dear to Sabah.”*

(Adri, 2019)

This cooperative spirit was also transferred to the current administration of Chief Minister Datuk Seri Hajiji Noor who hoped to continue socio-economic initiatives with Indonesia via crafting initiatives through the Social Economy Malaysia Indonesia (Sosek-Malindo) and the East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) frameworks. This was further cemented with the recent approval of RM600 million from the Federal Government of Malaysia for the development of a road and customs, immigration, quarantine and, security complex (CIQS) at the entry point in Serudong (Sabah)/Simanggaris (Kalimantan) to facilitate connectivity between Sabah and North Kalimantan (The Star, 2021). However, this approval is still contingent on the relationship between the federal government and the state government of Sabah, still emphasising that governmentality would benefit the Sabah-Indonesia relationship even further.

Drawing upon the perception that there exists a shared cultural and linguistic heritage embedded into Bornean groups seems to be the primary diplomatic tool for Sabah's engagements with Indonesia. However, an economic caveat will still underpin this experiment of bilateral cooperation. National self-interest will continue to play a part in Indonesia's considerations to work together with Sabah as the latter will not only be a potential partner for investment, but also able to draw upon its other diplomatic links with other countries to attract investors into the new capital city. However, this may harken back to the Australian capital city move to Canberra where it only became an administrative capital but lacking the dynamic market environment that is conducive for a bustling metropolitan capital. The same can be said of Indonesia's new capital which will go against megacity trends indicative of many Southeast Asian capitals. This is evident with Indonesia still maintaining a stance that Jakarta shall remain as its financial capital with an already sophisticated and thriving market environment that has not properly been cultivated in the Kalimantan area (Maulia, 2021).

Yet, the move to Kalimantan is convenient in that the capital city shall be situated near to the region's capital Samarinda and the regional financial centre in the port city of Balikpapan. There is an opportunity for the latter to position itself as a maritime hub that can service the length of the Makassar Strait, a maritime feature that is also shared with Sabah. With increased economic activities surging within the region, there will be a need to accommodate new aspirations and interests in expanding an alternative trans-Pacific trade route, serving to complement the South China Sea trade route. Despite the uncertainties and vague predictions as to whether the move will yield significant economic gains, the move can still be viewed as an optimistic experiment of decentralisation. With Indonesia choosing to invoke Kalimantan - a peripheral region, it has no doubt precipitated conversations that developmental initiatives for Sabah and Sarawak are needed in the hopes of not missing out on economic opportunities. Malaysia can stand to adopt this measure with the federal government taking on instrumental measures to ensure that Sabah can undertake the administrative autonomy to meet these demands.

By securing a land route into Kalimantan, Sabah is not only allowed a new window of trade and logistics exporting goods to Kalimantan, but also incentivising further infrastructural development such as border towns which can potentially expand commercial viability. This could encourage further road connectivity with the border towns and other major towns in Sabah and provide a viable land route into Indonesia outside of the Sarawak route for Brunei to enter Indonesia. There are still other avenues for economic linkages such as an expansion of Sabah's maritime ports. Such a move would enhance connectivity of the supply chain within the region, allowing for increased market activities with Balikpapan along the Lombok-Makassar Straits, increasing its commercial viability with more container hubs and deep-water ports that can facilitate development of the trade route (The Star, 2021). Sabah stands to position itself as a logistics and commercial hub with increased capacities, expanding its revenue streams which can be channeled for further development into rural areas. Catalysing an exciting endeavor can act as progress for Sabah's civil society to connect and exchange further ideas.

If Sabah is to embark on this enterprise, it will serve as a success story for other Southeast Asian governments in the region to witness the benefits of investing in their periphery. Southern Philippines would come to mind along with Sulawesi in Indonesia. Crafting an elaborate network of peripheral regions being able to connect to act as a new regional centre of finance and commerce, further expands the BIMP-EAGA's prestige to act as a responsible regional inter-governmental organisation that hopes to act in the best interest of regional integration. Yet, this will still depend on the Malaysian Federal Government to allow Sabah the autonomy to pursue such an endeavour. It will still require confidence-building measures between Sabah and the Federal Government of Malaysia to agree to devolution for Sabah to conduct its affairs. Governmentality will offer the overarching ideal to push forward the tools needed for devolution.

However, this would require the emergence of strong and capable leaders that are able to bear the responsibility that devolution will bring. With Sabah's track record of party hopping and Faustian deals abound, it would be difficult to bring about a unified and consolidated front to holistically approach devolution. This is further cemented with the ethnic divide among Sabahans showing more cracks by the day. The ruling coalition has embedded itself as the premiere choice for the rural heartland of Sabah which consists of Kadazan-Dusun-Murut (KDM) communities, whereas the Warisan party and its allies have achieved the same but in urban areas and the East Coast – with both sides of the divide failing to reach a consensus on approaching devolution, yet seeking a piece of the glory on their own terms. Sabah is sitting on a precarious situation where a unified front is transported into the concert of negotiation and diplomacy between government and opposition parties, unlike in Sarawak where political parties can unify to gain some measure of autonomy in exchange for political support to the ruling party in the federal government. If conflict between the state government and opposition parties continue, or daresay, escalate, it would divide civil society from engaging with ideas of devolution among each other as political affinities will draw a line in the sand that would be difficult to cross. Both Chief Minister Hajiji Mohd Noor and former Chief Minister Shafie Apdal have shown resolute focus on empowering Sabah as a regional hub and has brought decisiveness into its expansion, but a Sabah shackled by the limitations of the federal government will delay any initiatives from reaching an optimal level of efficiency and efficacy.

## **CONCLUSION**

Sabah has been a product of the experiences it has gone through. It would be apt to assume that constructivism has shed substantial clarity into its social, political, and economic configuration. Yet, with rapid developments - both internally and externally, a new dialectic will emerge and identifying Sabah's position now will provide an introspective outlook into its future trajectories. It will also be safe to assume that with rising nationalist sentiments, there will be a reorientation of how the federal government engages with peripheral Sabah. One way or another, the "neo-colonialist" disposition Malaysia has inherited and enacted upon Sabah will come to a head and neither Sabah's political leaders nor civil society alone can enact the changes that will usher Sabah as a regional player. Instead, a civil and political conciliation that is in line with one identifiable vision of



devolution is required for Sabah's governmentality. This also requires an awakening of civil society to take up the task of articulating themselves that governmentality is not contingent on just political will, but the will of civil society to put on display how intense the call for devolution is.

Both have shown concerted effort in doing so. Yet, working in tandem has proven to be difficult, signifying the pervasive hierarchy that continues to emphasise the primacy of the Malaysian Federal Government. Arguably, it can be said that the state government has also taken on sensibilities that are in line with the *status quo* of the federal government given the current power relations that have been installed over the numerous decades since Sabah has agreed to form the federation. This is even more so, looking back at how the articulation of power has been utilised by Sabah's former colonial masters. This does present a fork in the road for leaders and civil society alike which requires a significant amount of will continue traversing.

In conclusion, Sabah is presented an opportunity for a new lease on governance as a story of peripheral awakening. Regardless of how extreme the measures would be taken to articulate itself as a member of the federation, the call for autonomy will continue to remain as the primary mode of resisting disciplinary power of institutions of "Malayanisation" which sought to erode Sabah's nationalist spirit. Therefore, introspection on what Sabahans hope to see in their devolution and how they organise themselves will be the decisive factor in the years to come.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The safeguards for Sabah within MA63 were enshrined in the state list of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, Donald Stephens is also known as Tun Fuad Stephens.

<sup>3</sup> Sabah's current position within the federation has led to adages such as "penjajah Malaya (Malayan coloniser)" to bleed into Sabahan pop culture.

<sup>4</sup> Although Tun Mustapha was aggressively antagonistic towards the Malaysian Federal Government he would eventually run as a component of BN during the 1980s.

<sup>5</sup> Putting it simply, chronologically, Sabah was under the stewardship of Tun Mustapha at first as head of USNO (United Sabah National Organisation), who was later defeated by Donald Stephens running under BERJAYA (Sabah People's United Front), after Stephen's passing Harris Salleh took it upon himself to become the leader of the party and became too subservient to the Federal government, this was challenged by Joseph Pairin Kitingan who formed PBS. Eventually PBS would be absorbed into BN and over time UMNO was able to place its own candidates into the role of Chief Minister of Sabah.

<sup>6</sup> Mustapha and Harris were staunch in ensuring Islamisation processes were carried out throughout a multi-religious Sabah.

<sup>7</sup> The Warisan Party was formed by Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal, a former UMNO member who gathered other disgruntled politicians from different parties. The party was set up to champion Sabah's rights and autonomy.

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