

## **SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE IN SARAWAK: AN ANALYSIS OF POPULAR ISSUES AND THEIR CORRELATION WITH THE GABUNGAN PARTI SARAWAK MANIFESTO IN 2021**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Social media, notably Facebook, has been reported to be actively used by all, particularly when expressing opposing perspectives on various matters related to Sarawak and Sarawak's interests. The debate became more interesting during the period of political change in 2018 when Sarawak began to realign its position within a shifting political landscape. Consequently, the realignment had also influenced the framing of the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) manifesto during the 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21). The article attempts to identify the popular issues circulated in social media and to correlate them with the highlighted issues embedded in the GPS manifesto in SSE21. Data was collected from Facebook from 20 December 2018 to 26 January 2019 through historical data retrieval process. About 197 high-engagement posts were selected as the dataset. Thematic analysis was used in the analytic methods, which was carried out using QSR NVivo 12 Plus. Six main topics were identified that served as focal points of discussion for online discourse in Sarawak: sociocultural topics; economic topics; political topics; development topics; constitutional and legal topics; and border and security topics. Among the topics, three main issues have been identified to be crucial for Sarawakians: (1) constitutional and legal issues – issues that are related to Sarawak rights, Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), and federal and state constitution; (2) sociocultural issues – regional sentiments that are related to*

*the ideals of being a Sarawakian; and (3) political issues – issues of federal-state relations. It is suggested that as the online discussion of the issues gains traction, Sarawakians are observed to be more engaged in topics within the framing of their perceived position within the federation, specifically relating to the preferred position of their identity as Sarawakian first as opposed to Malaysian first. The formation of GPS as a local-based coalition has immensely benefited GPS since it is consistent with its agenda of “Sarawak First”. The study’s findings imply that there is consistency between the topics raised by Sarawakians during Sarawak’s term as an opposition state in 2018 and the themes contained in the GPS manifesto during the SSE21.*

**Keywords:** 2021 Sarawak State Election, online discussion, Sarawak First, Facebook, metrics

## INTRODUCTION

Social media plays an essential role in shaping political discourse (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013). It opens up a space for deliberating political issues (Dahlberg 2001; Mohd Azizuddin 2014; Papacharissi 2004) whilst exposing users to many different points of view relevant for vibrant democracy (Kasmani, Sabran and Ramle 2014). Undeniably, social media creates a stimulating public sphere where users are allowed to express their views and ideas actively. It encourages users’ access to a multitude of information, thus sparking the democratisation of information faster than the mainstream media (Dutta and Bhat 2016). On the flip side, social media may inadvertently create a sort of echo chamber. Instead of exposing users to diverse perspectives, it limits the exposure of users to diverse perspectives by reinforcing shared narratives (Cinelli et al. 2021) through users’ capacity to be selective towards information (Messing and Westwood 2014). Users tend to consume information that adheres to their preferred narratives. As such, users that exhibit selective exposure prefer to focus their attention on information offered by a small number of sources (e.g., news outlets), despite the existence of a large number of alternatives (Cinelli et al. 2020). These situations show that social media hold a complex ability to either engage or disengage users.

Sarawak is an interesting case study for delving into the complexity of social media and its ability to engage and disengage. Sarawak has a fascinating history of social media utilisation for both mobilisations of movements such as the Sarawak for Sarawakians Movement (S4S) (Ting 2021), electoral politics such as the usage of YouTube videos (Hah 2018), and Facebook posts by major political parties contesting in state elections in Sarawak (Nadrawina 2018).

Social media, particularly Facebook, has been actively utilised by users, especially when discussing opinions on various topics pertaining to Sarawak and Sarawak's interests. The discussion was stimulated during the period of political transition in 2018 when Sarawak started to realign its discourse and position within federal-state relations in a changing political landscape. Consequently, the realignment had also influenced the framing of Gabungan Parti Sarawak's (GPS) manifesto during the 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21).

This article attempts to identify popular issues related to the keyword "Sarawak" that circulated in social media, specifically within Facebook during the state's stint as an opposition state in 2018 and to compare the issues with the GPS manifesto during the SSE21. Is there any correlation between the popular issues that circulated in 2018 with the highlighted issues embedded in GPS' political manifesto in the SSE21?

## **FACEBOOK AS A CONTENT-SHARING PLATFORM**

The use of Facebook as a social media platform has become increasingly noticeable (Debatin et al. 2009). Facebook was selected specifically for this article because Facebook was identified as the most preferred social media platform among social media users in Malaysia. It is estimated that among 24.81 million social networking users, about 91.7% owned a Facebook account in 2020 (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission 2020) which indicates a higher reach among Malaysian social media users within that specific platform compared to other social media platforms such as Twitter (37.1%) or Instagram (63.1%).

Facebook's usage is not limited to information sharing; users use the platform to interact with each other. Although some researchers believe that social interactions using computers as a medium could destroy the quality of human interaction and is not appropriate for effective social contact (Baron 1984), the fact that it can diversify people's source of information and rebalance the ability in communicating messages for the marginalised and diaspora communities (Stacey 2018) are worth mentioning.

The development of various communication technologies has altered the way citizens receive and react to news and information. The advancement of communication technology has shifted the information flow from a top-down manner in the traditional media towards a more engaging one in the new media. As a subset of new media, social media enables people to interact, reconnect and

socialise (Graciyal and Viswam 2018) by allowing online interaction. It acts as a virtual space for social networking sites users to express themselves, keep up with current events, and share ideas and information. A critical feature of social media that has increased its relevance in the political context is its immediacy, which allows faster user response, thus enabling users to share received information and express their views in real time while creating a sphere for people to converse about a topic (Graciyal and Viswam 2018). Users can post and publish their information online, bypassing traditional news gatekeepers (Harlow 2012), allowing users to participate directly in mobilising movements or deliberating their political agendas. In essence, it opens up a new communication landscape (Kietzmann et al. 2011) which gives way to interconnectivity between individuals while making information available to all regardless of the different languages, cultures and political backgrounds.

A survey done by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2020) identified three types of content shared online by users, namely news content (66.9%), public service announcements (60.9%), and entertainment and humorous content (56.1%). Sarawak alone has numerous Facebook groups that serve as a collaborative platform for a multitude of purposes, be it political (e.g., GPS – Gabungan Parti Sarawak Official and DAP Sarawak); social (e.g., *Kamek Miak Sarawak*, Kota Samarahan Community and Sarawak Roads Update); or economic (e.g., *Jual Beli Kuching/Samarahan* and *Persatuan Penanam Cili Sarawak*). Characterisation of the Facebook groups in Sarawak can be divided into three major types that are similar to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission's three identified types of online content: news content, public service announcement, and entertainment and humorous content.

## **METHODS**

Data collection from Facebook was done through historical data retrieval process aided by the media monitoring tool, Brand24. The concept of a social media monitoring tool for data retrieval from social media platforms closely resembles the concept of search engines. In order to capture related data, the social media monitoring tool sends crawlers (Martínez-Castaño, Pichel and Losada 2020) into the internet while continuously indexing the predetermined keywords. Information such as the content of the post, source of the collected posts, number of likes, number of comments and reach of the post as well as a list of influencers, its sources, and number of shares, were documented systematically using the Excel spreadsheet, making Brand24 a versatile tool for this study.

The data collection procedure has four steps. The first step involves data collection through the social media monitoring tool. The data was collected from 20 December 2018 until 26 January 2019, collecting original posts retrieved from the internet under the keywords “Sarawak OR swk OR swak”. From the procedure, 12,279 Facebook posts were collected successfully.

The second step involves data cleaning. The data cleaning process is necessary because social media data is big and noisy. Tang, Chang and Liu (2013) explained that noisy data consists of meaningless data. Noisy data is unavoidable because user-generated content in social media is often highly unstructured and incomplete (Hu et al. 2017). The contents are unstructured because users tend to use mobile devices to publish their online content, resulting in short texts, typos and spacing errors, and posts that are free from languages such as excessive use of abbreviation (e.g., “whr r u”) and ASCII art (e.g., “:”) and “:o”). Incomplete contents meanwhile indicate that the user’s data is unavailable due to privacy concerns. The data cleaning process yields 5,450 cleaned posts (44.38% of the overall 12,279 posts). The percentage produced from the cleaning process is in line with previous work by Bode et al. (2016, p. 586) that indicated mentions of issues are less prevalent on social media (i.e., 54.2% of tweets have no issue contents).

The third step involves data categorisation. Data categorisation is done to identify posts that carry a high engagement rate. Jaakonmäki, Müller and vom Brocke (2017, 1,152) explained that in social media research, engagement rate measures the quantity of user responses and interactions. This information is beneficial for identifying posts containing high engagement rates and specific types of posts that tend to garner momentum in discussing and spreading information/ideals regarding issues related to Sarawak. Whilst engagement rate is calculated differently across social media platforms, generally, it indicates the percentage of people who react to a particular post. Typically, the calculation for engagement rate is as follows:

$$\text{Engagement rate} = \left( \frac{\text{Total engaged users}}{\text{Total reach}} \right) \times 100$$

Where, engaged users = the number of people who engaged with a post by commenting on it, reacting to it, or sharing it; and post reach = the total number of people who had a post come up in their feed.

However, considering that it is impossible to retrieve the value of the total reach of a specific Facebook post, the engagement rate formulated for this study considers the engagement rate formula devised by Vadivu and Neelamalar (2015, 73) instead.

$$\text{Engagement rate} = \frac{(\text{TL} \times 1) + (\text{TC} \times 2) + (\text{TS} \times 3)}{6 \times \text{Total fans}}$$

Where, TL = total likes; TC = total comments; and TS = total shares.

Comparing the two formulas, the latter considers each item in a hierarchical value system. Vadivu and Neelamalar (2015, 73) asserted that users' interactions are multiplied by a number (weight) based on the item's relative importance. Hence, specific to this study, there are three items considered as users' engagement: likes, comments and shares.

“Share” holds the highest weight at the value of “three” as users not only engage with the post but also intend to influence their friends by sharing the post on their own Facebook wall, increasing users' views and awareness of the content. This is followed by “comments” with the value of “two” and finally “likes” with the value of “one”. Comments hold a higher weightage value than likes, as it engages users in the discussion, cultivating discussion on the content. Likes, on the other hand, indicate that the post is being noticed. By aggregating all three engagement items, a user's total engagement value to a particular Facebook post would be “six” (aggregate values of TL, TC and TS weightage). Vadivu and Neelamalar (2015) explained, “By providing a hierarchical value to each engagement element, the disagreement of providing equal weightage to like, comment and share and can be nullified”, hence providing a quantified value that acts as an indicator of posts that contain meaningful and impactful engagement. It is crucial to calculate engagement rates for the primary data because this systematically facilitates the process of identifying posts that carry an impact on the users whilst eliminating the researcher's bias towards choosing posts considered as “worthwhile” to be analysed.

The last step involves data identification. Dataset is divided into two types: Facebook posts and multilayer posts. Facebook posts refer to posts that users or Facebook groups posted to their Facebook timeline, while multilayer posts refer to posts posted as comments within a Facebook post.

In the dataset, it was found that Facebook posts carried a higher engagement rate than multilayer posts. About 988 data were identified as Facebook posts out of the overall 5,450 posts. Further exploration of these 988 data found that 197 posts were highly engaging. As low-engagement posts contain low interactivity among readers, only those 197 high-engagement posts were considered in this study.

## **ANALYSIS**

This study was undertaken with the understanding that using Facebook posts for analysis involves the limitation that there is currently no definitive method to determine if the data retrieved from the social media monitoring tool was complete. Furthermore, due to users' privacy settings, the social media monitoring tool could not retrieve data labelled as private by the creators. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that some posts were missed (Rieder 2013). However, given the size of the data collected, it is unlikely that the missing posts would significantly impact the results.

The analysis procedures employed for this study are thematic analysis. For thematic analysis, the social media monitoring tool's dataset was exported to QSR NVivo 12 Plus, a qualitative data analysis software. The thematic analysis unraveled the topics discussed by users in the mentions. The analysis process performed with NVivo involves open coding (disaggregation of data into units), axial coding (recognising relationships between categories), and selective coding (integration of categories to produce themes) (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

In this study, it is important to note that there is no definitive way to identify whether the Facebook pages are managed by independent activists or individuals/organisations affiliated with political parties. Such information is not readily available to the public and is not typically revealed by the administrators of these pages unless it is explicitly stated in their profiles. Therefore, any observations or assumptions made in this study are primarily based on the content and tone of the pages. For instance, if a page frequently posts content supporting a particular party or politician, it might be reasonable to assume that the page has some affiliation with that party or politician. However, these should be considered as assumptions rather than confirmed facts. This limitation reflects the challenges of studying online political discourse, where the identities and affiliations of content creators may not always be transparent.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Most would agree that the GPS landslide win in the SSE21 is a definitive indication of the shift in Sarawak politics. Learning from its previous major blow in the 2018 Malaysian General Election (GE14), which saw the then Sarawak Barisan Nasional's (Sarawak BN) expectation to retain all the 25 seats won in the 2013

Malaysian General Election (GE13) quashed by the success of Pakatan Harapan (PH), GPS in 2021 came out stronger.

In 2018, the apparent electoral shift of the Dayaks through the defeat in six constituencies: Mas Gading, Puncak Borneo, Lubok Antu, Saratok, Julau and Selangau was a strong signal for Sarawak BN to realign its manifesto to capture the interests of its voters. A study by Mersat (2018) on issues in Sarawak politics post-GE14 revealed that there were shifts in Sarawak's political issues. During GE14, three main factors were identified as Sarawak BN's main advantages: the Adenan Satem legacy, the "Sarawak for Sarawakians" sentiment, and the politics of developmentalism. Nevertheless, as revealed by the result of the election, Sarawak BN's strength may be weaker than anticipated, and the factors identified as favouring the coalition in the GE14 were not able to deliver enough support from the dispersed and diverse Sarawak electorate.

As the dust of GE14 settled, Sarawak became the new opposition state instead of an ally of the federal government. With the change, it seemed like Sarawak BN was at the losing end of the deal. Many perceived that Sarawak BN's association with the tumultuous national coalition might somewhat affect Sarawakians' confidence. The state faced the problem of gaining support for development projects from the PH-led federal government, and it might also lose its ability to win local support considering a stronger Sarawak PH voice within the federal government. To break free from this impasse, on 12 June 2018, the Sarawak BN decided to exit the national coalition, forming a new coalition under the name of GPS.

Initially, the rebranding was remarked by Sarawak PH as "old wine in a new bottle" or "change of clothes" and that, despite the name change, the rebranded GPS would still inherit the same ever-present problems such as corruption, abuse of public funds, issues of native customary rights (NCR), and Sarawak's lack of development (Chung 2021). Nonetheless, despite the name-calling, GPS seemed optimistic about the formation of the new local-based political coalition.

With PH at the helm in Putrajaya, BN-controlled patronage networks between the federal and the state were finally broken, and the federal-state relations were now more aggressively tackled under the PH government than any other preceding administration (Yeoh 2020). There was a constant political tug-of-war between GPS as an opposition state and the PH administration as the federal government. With the PH government still grappling for stability, within the small phase of political adjustment, GPS managed to take charge of the everyday narration in Sarawak way ahead of Sarawak PH, thus enabling GPS to shape the political discourse of the state to be in favour of GPS' agenda.



The formation of a local-based political coalition came at an opportune time for GPS as it needed to champion its “Sarawak First” policy, which prioritises Sarawak’s interest before others (*Dayak Daily* 2020). Moreover, the policy of Sarawak First has become the crux of everything the state is fighting for. By embracing the Sarawak First policy, GPS successfully changed the political landscape of Sarawak. Sarawak First has been identified as a critical factor for the GPS landslide victory in SSE21, which managed to tempt votes from not only the rural constituencies but also from the urban constituencies (*Sarawak Voice* 2022). With the policy becoming the primary framework that shapes Sarawak’s political discourse, there must be a coherence between the issues that were discussed by Sarawakians online during Sarawak’s stint as an opposition state with the GPS manifesto during the state election itself. The consistency and coherence of the prevalent issues discussed in 2018 with the issues highlighted in the GPS manifesto in 2021 may be the reason why the coalition successfully influenced voters’ decisions during SSE21.

The results of SSE21 showed outright rejection of all Malayan-based political parties. Some might agree that the Sarawak political scenario in 2021 was an outcome of Adenan’s populist and regionalist policy—under whose leadership the Sarawak for Sarawakian sentiment was successfully constructed (Awang Azman et al. 2016). The changing political scenario in 2021 resulted from the tide of change during GE14, which saw BN’s defeat at the federal level, was unexpected and unprecedented. The change consequently heightened the popularity of Sarawak PH. However, in only three years, the popularity of the Sarawak PH became dramatically weaker, all due to its failure to fulfil its GE14 manifesto and to understand local issues that were of interest to Sarawakians.

The Sarawak for Sarawakians discourse has deep roots in the state’s history, predating even the formation of Malaysia. This sentiment was first popularised by the state’s inaugural Chief Minister, Datuk Amar Stephen Kalong Ningkan, who was ousted during the 1966 Sarawak crisis (Chin 1997). The Sarawak National Party (SNAP) used this slogan to emphasise state identity during the 1969 elections, and despite potential secessionist interpretations, Ningkan consistently denied such intentions (Milne and Ratnam 1974, p. 106).

Over the past few decades, this sentiment has grown, particularly in response to perceived injustices and inequalities in the treatment of Sarawak within the Federation of Malaysia. It has been expressed in various ways, including through political campaigns, social movements and public discourse, and is often associated with calls for greater autonomy and recognition of Sarawak’s unique cultural, historical and political status.

The late Adenan Satem's pivotal 2016 manifesto marked a significant milestone in this ongoing discourse. His manifesto, which emphasised safeguarding the state's interests and called for the restoration of Sarawak's full rights within the Federation of Malaysia under the context of the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), ignited public sentiment and brought the state-centric narrative to the forefront. This stirred the consciousness of the locals and sparked intense discussions around the autonomy of Sarawak.

Subsequent to this, the GPS appropriated and amplified this discourse. On 8 December 2021, GPS launched their 34-point manifesto with the adoption of Sarawak First as its central campaign focus. This manifesto drew heavily on the sentiments and principles laid out in Adenan's 2016 manifesto, highlighting the party's pledge to guarantee Sarawak's political stability, autonomy and prosperity through a digital and sustainable economy.

Thus, it can be seen that the 2016 manifesto served as the catalyst, creating a surge of state-centric sentiments which was later harnessed by GPS in their 2021 manifesto. Adenan had reinvented and popularised the term "Sarawak regionalism" as a populist strategy to accentuate Sarawak interests and the significance of supporting then-Sarawak BN as the defender of Sarawakian rights and autonomy within Malaysia (Weiss and Puyok 2016).

## **UNDERSTANDING THE POPULAR ISSUES IN 2018**

In total, the thematic analysis identified six underlying themes that served as focal topics that formed the online discourse during Sarawak's stint as an opposition state in 2018.

### **Sociocultural Topics**

These posts often revolved around the unique cultural identity of Sarawak and its people. Example of related excerpt:

Inilah Sarawak, Perarakan tokong di Kuching turut di sertai oleh kumpual kompang tradisional Melayu saling hormat menghormati di antara satu sama lain meraikan kepelbagaian. This is Sarawak.... The Chinese Temple Road Show is followed by a Malay Transitional kompang team. This is just one of thousands peaceful message that Sarawak wants to show to the World. We are proud to be Sarawakians!! (Borneo 2019)

### **Economic Topics**

Discussions in this category typically focused on the state's economic development and resources. Example of related excerpt: "*Hasil bumi dari Sarawak dibawa ke Malaya. Kita pula yang berhutang sama pusat*" (Sabah Sarawak Future 2019).

### **Political Topics**

These posts often involved debates about political parties, leaders and policies. Example of related excerpt:

Tiada siapa boleh menjaga Sarawak selain anak-anak Sarawak sendiri. Bersama kita memastikan Sarawak dijaga dengan baik seperti pesanan bekas Ketua Menteri Allahyarham Pehin Sri Adenan Satem (Tok Nan). GPS akan terus melakukan yang terbaik untuk menyampaikan mandat yang diberikan rakyat Sarawak. (Barisan Nasional Sarawak 2019)

### **Development Topics**

Many users expressed their views on infrastructure and public services in Sarawak. Example of related excerpt:

Kepada Mereka yang Berkenaan (To Whom It May Concern) Fakta Sejarah: Projek Pan Borneo dari Telok Melano ke Lawas merentasi sepanjangnya negeri Sarawak adalah projek legasi peninggalan Tok Nan dan Tea Adenan (termasuk YAB DP Abang Jo Ketua Menteri sekarang). Maka adalah amat-amat diminta agar janganlah sama-sekali ada mana-mana pihak cuba mengubah fakta dan sejarah kerana ingin mendapat kredit politik. Rakyat Sarawak tidak mudah dikencing kecuali talibarut politik parti dari luar (Sarawak A Place Like No Other 2019)

### **Constitutional and Legal Topics**

These discussions often centred on Sarawak's rights and status within Malaysia. Example of related excerpt:

Mahathir cakap tiada siapa pun yang lebih tinggi daripada undang-undang. Kenapa Mahathir Perdana Menteri Malaysia terus mencuri dan merompak hak dan harta Sabah dan Sarawak. Adakah Mahathir lebih tinggi dari Perlembagaan Persekutuan atau Raja Raja Malaya (Zainnal 2019)

## Border and Security Topics

These posts often discussed issues related to border control and public safety. Example of related excerpt:

Sarawak should reintroduce the use of passports for people from West Malaysia and Sabah to enter the state as it is part of the immigration autonomy under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), opined Deputy Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr James Jemut Masing. (DayakDaily 2018)

The dataset containing information about high-engagement Facebook pages was examined to understand these topics better. The Facebook pages were categorised into four main origins: Sarawak-based (39 Facebook pages), Peninsular-based (12 Facebook pages), Sabah-based (4 Facebook pages), and unidentified origin (2 Facebook pages) (see Figure 1).

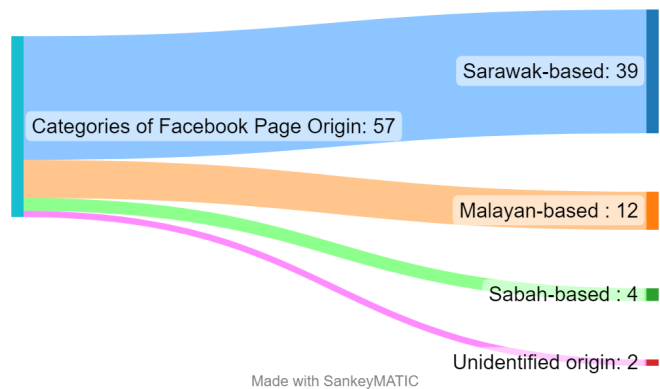


Figure 1: Categories of Facebook page origin.

The unidentified Facebook pages (Sabah Sarawak Future and PKR Sarawak FC) were classified as such because both Facebook pages did not disclose their origin clearly in their profile pages. For PKR Sarawak FC Facebook, even though the name of the page indicates its origin as Sarawak, the posts posted in its timeline were primarily related to Peninsular-based news reports. Meanwhile, the Sabah Sarawak Future Facebook contained posts that were mainly Sabah-based. Moreover, the languages used for both pages were mostly standard Malay and Sabah Malay dialects—a characteristic that is foreign among local Sarawak-based pages. Local Sarawak-based pages tend to post local Sarawak news and are often written in English or standard Malay and occasionally local Sarawak Malay but not entirely in standard Malay or Sabah Malay dialect. Hence, both pages were classified under unidentified origin.

## The Popularity of Sarawak-Based Facebook Pages

From the dataset, 57 Facebook pages were identified, producing 197 high-engagement posts. From the 57 Facebook pages, Sarawak-based Facebook pages were considered more popular among Sarawakians when topics on Sarawak were posted online, producing 189 high-engagement posts of the overall 197 posts. The types of posts in the Sarawak-based Facebook pages contained all six topics, as opposed to the other pages originating from outside of Sarawak that only covered at most five topics from its high engagement posts (see Figure 2). This may indicate that contents posted by Sarawak-based Facebook pages were more popular than those from outside Sarawak as Sarawakians prefer local-based Facebook pages to present content related to Sarawak. It suggests, to some degree, that Sarawakians have more trust in content related to Sarawak from Sarawak-based Facebook pages than from Facebook pages that originated outside of Sarawak.

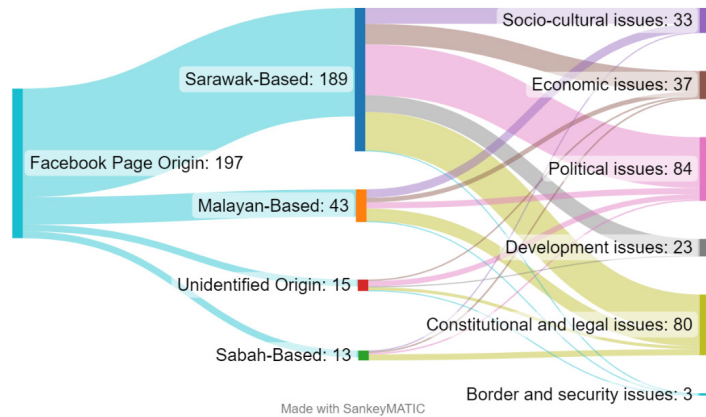


Figure 2: Facebook page origin and types of issues covered.

The unequal number of Facebook pages and topics produced by these pages showed that the pages tended to cover multiple issues per content posted (see Figure 2). Therefore, some degree of overlap on issues posted per post was expected. It was observed that Sarawak-based Facebook pages tended to create content with overlapping issues actively. Facebook pages of local news outlets were more prone to utilise this method in their content than other types of Facebook pages. For example, *Dayak Daily* produced 20 high-engagement posts which covered all six topics. Out of these 20 posts, 27 issues were presented. The *Borneo Post Online* also presented its Facebook content in the same manner, where out of its 26 high-engagement posts, 32 issues were presented (see Table 1). Perhaps, the versatile contents of Sarawak-based Facebook pages in presenting the overlapping issues related to Sarawak were why these pages were popular among readers.

Table 1: Sarawak-based Facebook pages and overlapping issues covered

Author	No. of posts	Sociocultural	Economic	Political	Development	Constitutional and legal	Border and security
Warta Sarawak	3	1	-	1	-	1	-
Utusan Borneo Online	6	-	2	2	1	2	-
TVSarawak.com	8	2	3	4	2	2	-
The Kuchingite	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
SarawakVoice.com	17	1	2	11	2	5	-
Sarawakku Sayang	2	-	-	2	-	-	-
Sarawak Report	1	-	-	1	1	-	-
Sarawak IbuPertiwiku	4	-	2	2	1	1	-
Sarawak First	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
Sarawak Edition	5	-	3	1	1	3	-
Sarawak Dayak Community (SDC)	2	-	-	1	-	1	-
Sarawak Daily	1	-	-	1	1	-	-
Sarawak Aritok	6	-	-	2	2	2	-
Sarawak A Place Like No Other	2	-	-	2	1	1	-
Salfian Nawawi	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
Lo Khere Chiang	4	1	1	3	1	3	-
Kuching laporan dan isu tempatan	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
KUCHING	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
Kamek Miak Sarawak	6	2	2	-	1	1	-
Jiwa Bakti	3	-	-	2	1	2	-

(continued on next page)

Table 1: (continued)

Author	No. of posts	Sociocultural	Economic	Political	Development	Constitutional and legal	Border and security
I Love Kuching	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Hornbill Talks	1	-	-	1	-	-	-
Hajah Nancy Haji Shukri	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
GPS	2	-	-	2	1	-	-
Gerald Rentap Jabu DUN N36 Layar	4	-	1	4	-	-	-
Fadillah Yusof	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
Dayak Daily	20	2	2	13	1	8	1
Dato Sri Dr Haji Wan Junaidi Bin Tuanku Jaafar	1	-	-	1	-	-	-
Cikgu Emmet Menulis	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Borneo Post Online	26	3	6	7	4	12	-
Borneo Oracle	1	1	-	1	-	1	-
Borneo	2	2	-	-	-	-	-
Bintulu News Page	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Bintulu INFO	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
Berita Kenyalang Sarawak	1	-	-	-	1	-	-
Bengkor	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
Barisan Nasional Sarawak	1	1	-	1	-	-	-
Ali Biju P205 Saratok	1	-	-	1	-	1	-
Abdul Aziz Isa 阿都阿兹伊砂	1	-	-	1	-	1	-

### The Popularity of Constitutional and Legal Topics among Sarawakians

As the dataset dealt with high-engagement posts, it could be assumed that the issues presented by the Facebook pages carried some weight on what is deemed important by Sarawakians. Therefore, based on this assumption, a comparative analysis was done between Facebook pages originating from the Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo states (Sabah and Sarawak). Figure 3 shows the percentage of content posted by Facebook origins. The data showed a high percentage of posts containing constitutional and legal topics that received high engagement from the Peninsular-based Facebook pages (47%) and the Borneo-based Facebook pages (39%). The Peninsular-based Facebook pages that touched on the topic were found to be from prominent news outlets such as *Astro Awani* (4 posts); *Free Malaysia Today* (3 posts); *The Star Online* (3 posts); *Malay Mail* (2 posts); *Berita Harian Online* (2 posts); and *R.AGE*, *Malaysiakini* and *AskLegal* where each page produced one post, respectively.

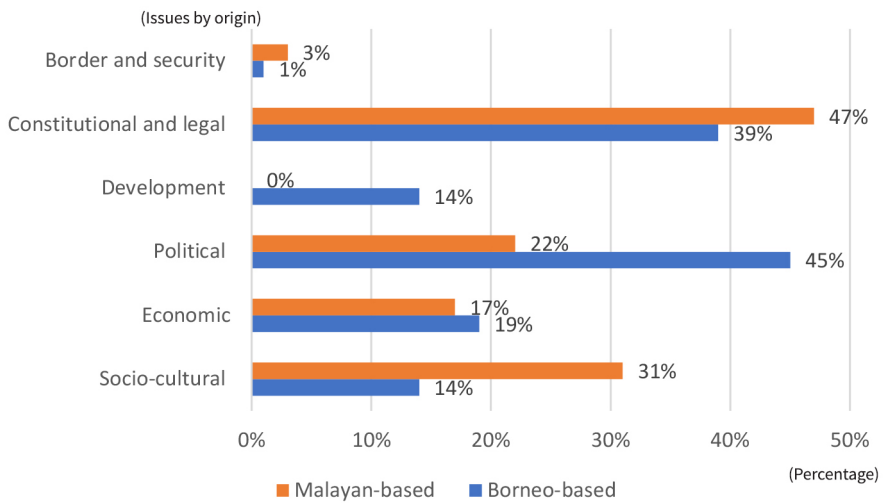


Figure 3: Issues by origin (Borneo-based and Peninsular-based).

When cross-examination was performed on the popular posts posted by these prominent news outlets, the posts were found to be viral when (1) the news was cited directly by Sarawak-based Facebook pages in their posts, and (2) the news contained keywords that prompted readers to react. Examples include posts from SarawakVoice.com (2019), “*Isu penyelenggaraan Jalan Persekutuan, mengapa perlu bertindak zalim terhadap Sarawak – Najib*” and “All states in Malaysia will enforce the smoking ban at all eateries tomorrow – except for Sarawak” (BorneoPost Online 2019).



Word clouds can also be used to illustrate different themes. The magnitude of the word within the topic shows its prevalence among the cluster of words that comprise the topic (Schwartz et al. 2013). Keywords can be easily viewed when a word cloud visual representation is generated (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Word cloud of the Facebook posts.

Upon further examination, keywords related to the issues such as “*hak/our rights/right*”, “*ma63/Malaysia agreement, Perjanjian Malaysia*”, and “*constitution/perlembagaan*” carried a total number of 182 mentions (see Table 2). This finding supported the observation that constitutional and legal topic were prevalent issues in 2018.

On 14 December 2021, just days before SSE21, the bill to restore the rights of Sabah and Sarawak for equal status as signatories of the MA63 was passed (Rahimy 2021). Whether by chance or design, the reinstatement of these rights greatly favoured GPS in the days running up to the election (Onn and Zhang 2021, 9–10). Given that the topic continues to be discussed actively in Sarawak’s social media, it is expected that the issue related to the Federal Constitution and MA63 will continue to be an ever-present topic of interest to Sarawak.

Table 2: Total number of mentions and their keywords

Total no. of mentions	No. of mentions (Keyword)
571	552 (Sarawak); 14 (Sarawak's); 5 (Sarawak's)
182	130 (Kerajaan); 52 (Government)
113	95 (GPS); 18 (Gabungan)
124	91 (Negeri); 31 (State); 2 (Negeri-negeri)
166	89 (Persekutuan); 55 (Federal); 22 (Putrajaya)
88	56 (Hak); 26 (Our rights); 6 (Right)
80	76 (Malaysia); 2 (Malaysian); 2 (Malaysia's)
73	73 (Sabah)
77	24 (Education); 16 (Pendidikan); 10 (Schools); 7 (School); 15 (Sekolah); 5 (Sekolah-sekolah)
65	34 (MA63); 15 (Malaysia Agreement); 16 (Perjanjian Malaysia)
50	26 (Merokok); 24 (Smoking)
43	37 (Tanah); 4 (Land); 2 (Menoa)
46	34 (Kuasa); 1 (Powers); 11 (Power)
46	23 (Peruntukan); 20 (Dana); 3 (Belanjawan)
39	22 (Brooke); 17 (Rajah)
35	22 (Anak Sarawak); 3 (Sarawakian); 9 (Sarawakians); 1 (Weareallsarawakians)
34	31 (Jalan); 3 (Highway)
31	27 (Malaya); 2 (Malayalah); 2 (Malayan)
29	14 (Constitution); 15 (Perlembagaan)
27	25 (Hutang); 2 (Owed)

Table 2 shows the clusters of keywords from the 20 highest mentions from the dataset. The number of mentions among the cluster of keywords demonstrated the prevalence of issues. These keywords may also indicate the issues that prompted readers to engage in Facebook posts. Consequently, engagement exposure further exposes readers to like-minded users and reinforces their shared narratives (Cinelli et al. 2021), prompting the posts to be viral. This situation is similar to “echo chambers”, or patterns of information sharing that reinforce pre-existing political beliefs by limiting exposure to opposing political views (Bail et al. 2018). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the issues brought forward by these types of posts that contained such keywords continued garnering Sarawakian readers’ attention, thus reinforcing their interest in interacting on the issues. This is compounded

by the role of the state government, i.e., when they continue to act on the issues, which would spark the people's interest and further encourage online discourse on the topics.

## **MANAGING FACEBOOK NEWS SOURCES**

In 2018, Sarawak as an opposition state was perceived as becoming more vocal in its retaliation towards unfavourable policies from the federal government. It is a widespread perception among Sarawakians that the Sarawak state government represents Sarawak in championing state rights. Through online exposure, coverage of the issue has propelled Sarawak rights to be discussed openly by the public. The sentiment gains popularity because of its relevance to Sarawak politics and its online exposure in Sarawak.

Sarawak politicians are quick to understand the relevance of online content and its influence in gaining people's support whilst earning their emotional attachment. It appears that Sarawak local leaders were not hesitant to use their Facebook pages to reach out to the Sarawak social media users, be it their personal Facebook, the parties' official Facebook, or exposure from local community-based Facebook. Table 3 shows that out of the 39 high-engagement Sarawak-based Facebook pages, 10 are Facebook pages maintained by Sarawak politicians or political organisations. The result indicated that these types of Facebook pages carry influence among Sarawakians. It showed that Sarawakians are more open to obtaining information directly from their local political leaders (seven Facebook pages) than politically driven public figures (two Facebook pages).

Table 3: Categories of Facebook pages in Sarawak

Facebook page categories	No. of Facebook pages
News and media website	13
Community/culture website	13
Politician	7
Personal/Public figure	2
Political organisation	3
Non-governmental organisation (NGO)	1

Regarding Facebook posts containing political issues, Figure 3 shows that Sarawakians were more receptive towards local Borneo-based Facebook pages (45%) than Peninsular-based ones (22%). The data showed that Sarawakians

displayed a specific preference for the type of sources that they chose to engage with regarding the subject of Sarawak politics. Upon further examination, online discourse on political topics was found to be about locally driven issues and mostly posted by Sarawak-based Facebook pages. Thus, it was unsurprising that the local Sarawak political parties managed to continue garnering support and interest from the Sarawak public, as the public themselves were more receptive towards the content of the Sarawak-based Facebook pages than that of the Peninsular-based ones. This preference may deter Peninsular-based political parties or Peninsular-based news outlets' Facebook pages from garnering engagement from Sarawakians as the locals favoured locally driven issues instead of nationally driven ones.

## **REGIONAL SENTIMENTS AND FEDERAL-STATE RELATIONS AS CONSTANT ISSUES**

Table 2 shows the number of mentions for keywords related to sociocultural topics. It was discovered that the regionalism issue has 66 mentions (keywords: “Malaya”, “Malayalah”, “Malayan”, “Anak Sarawak”, “Sarawakian”, “Sarawakians”, and “Weareallsarawakians”), whilst keywords related to the issues of politics such as federal-state relations recorded 545 mentions (keywords: Kerajaan”, “Government”, “Negeri”, “State”, “Negeri-negeri”, “Persekutuan”, “Federal”, “Putrajaya”, and “Sabah”). It showed that the issues of regionalism and federal-state relations carried substantial weight in determining the framing of discussions on Sarawak. In addition, the engagement on the issues among Sarawakians showed acceptance towards the topic.

Sarawak regional sentiment is a constant idea that has always been around before and after the formation of Malaysia in 1963. It is possible that the intensification of the sentiment can also be associated with Sarawak's political experience. For instance, the idea became more appealing around 2008 due to the federal government's weakening power following the then ruling BN losing its customary two-thirds majority in the 2008 12th Malaysian General Election (GE12). This turn of events became a decisive moment for Sarawak and increased the Sarawak state government's bargaining power in its quest to decentralise power from the federal government (Chin 2018).

The federal government's continuous weakening power elevated Sarawak's importance in national politics and reminded state leaders to continue to safeguard state interests from “outsiders”. The outsiders typically mentioned within the dataset referred to anybody or any entity considered “not” Sarawakian. Examples of such notions are Sarawak politicians versus Peninsular (or “Malayan”) politicians, state

government versus the federal government, or Peninsular-based parties versus Sarawak-based parties.

The results of GE14 in 2018 saw Sarawak becoming an opposition state in Malaysia for the first time. Sarawak's changing position within Malaysian politics can be seen through two perspectives, (1) as a catalyst for the issues of Sarawak rights to be brought forward more aggressively by the state government, and (2) raising the state government's popularity as the vanguard for safeguarding the interest of Sarawak within the federation. Both positions can strengthen the state government's acceptance and popularity in Sarawak.

As the discussion about Sarawak rights and MA63 steadily gained momentum online, Sarawakians began to critically discuss their positions within the federation, particularly concerning their regional position within Malaysia. Within the limit of the 2018 dataset, the data suggested that the position of Sarawak's regional identity was more sustainable among Sarawakians. When considered from the perspective of the lower level of social reality, i.e., from the perspective of ordinary Sarawakians, this implied that the identity of being a Malaysian, which was an externally imposed identity, came second to the Sarawak regional identity.

This situation echoed the data obtained from a survey by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Singapore (ISEAS) in 2018 that revealed that 63% of Sarawakians would identify themselves as Sarawakian first and only 24% identified themselves as Malaysian first (Guan 2018). The ISEAS data showed that regional identity display is very strong among surveyed respondents from Sarawak. It gives an indication of the prevailing regional sentiments among Sarawakians. Besides that, the reaffirmation by the state on the issue of Sarawak regionalism during its stint as an opposition state had further deepened Sarawak's determination to continue highlighting the issue as one of its interests. The constant narration and discourse of regionalism have turned into discussions on Sarawak's struggle for autonomy or self-determination. It is expected that online discourse on these topics would go beyond the federal-state dichotomy and be confined within two domains – region (Sarawak) and nation (Malaysia).

## **COHERENCE BETWEEN ISSUES AND GPS MANIFESTO IN SSE21**

The GPS 34-point manifesto was launched on 8 December 2021, highlighting the state's pledge to guarantee Sarawak's political stability, autonomy and prosperity through a digital and sustainable economy, with the adoption of the Sarawak First theme as its central campaign focus. The manifesto echoed the same sentiments

raised in the 2016 manifesto under Adenan, safeguarding the state's interests and calling for the restoration of Sarawak's full rights within the Federation of Malaysia under the context of MA63.

The preamble for the 100 page-manifesto was a message from Abang Johari Openg (or Abang Jo), the GPS chairman, who quoted Adenan's favourite statement, "*Jaga Sarawak, intui Sarawak*", which means "take care of Sarawak". There were six main points in Abang Jo's message:

1. The reassurance that GPS was capable of fighting for Sarawak's rights.
2. The assurance that GPS was capable of accelerating Sarawak's development through well-planned and systematic development projects.
3. The reaffirmation of GPS' capability to successfully implement assistance through initiatives and assistance packages during COVID-19.
4. The assurance that no Sarawakian would be left behind under the Post COVID-19 Development Strategy (PCDS) that aimed at making Sarawak a developed state by 2030.
5. The assurance that GPS would continue to strive to preserve social harmony and unity among the people of various religions in Sarawak.
6. The calls for all Sarawakians to support a stable, prosperous and glorious Sarawak.

Abang Jo remarked that the manifesto was "very comprehensive in fighting the rights of Sarawak, guaranteeing the rights of the people, looking after the welfare of the people and developing Sarawak's future" (*Borneo Post Online* 2021).

Table 4 shows a tabulation of identified topics from the 2018 dataset with GPS' 34-point manifesto. Focusing on the six identified topics: sociocultural topic, economic topic, political topic, development topic, constitutional and legal topic, and border and security topic, a comparison was made with the GPS 34-point manifesto in SSE21. It shows prominent coherence between the issues discussed by internet users in 2018 with the GPS manifesto in SSE21. For example, based on the sociocultural issues captured under the 2018 historical data, the GPS manifesto encapsulated all the discussed 2018 issues within its pledges. Pledges such as guarantees to defend the rights of Sarawak through the Federal Constitution, MA63, and the Sarawak State Constitution; recognising the people's rights to

Table 4: Identified topics from the 2018 dataset with the GPS 34-point manifesto

Sociocultural topic	Economic topic	Political topic	Development topic	Constitutional and legal topic	Border and security topic
3. Guarantee equal rights for all Sarawakians.	5. Propel Sarawak towards a high-income and developed state by 2030.	1. Assure the stability and political autonomy of Sarawak.	5. Propel Sarawak towards a high-income and developed state by 2030.	2. Safeguard and protect Sarawak's rights in accordance with the Federal Constitution, Malaysia Agreement 1963, the Sarawak State Constitution and Sarawak State Laws.	24. Ensure the safety of the state and the people.
4. Recognise and guarantee people's rights to Native Customary Right (NCR) land and Native Territorial Domain (NTD).	6. Reduce income disparity through creation of more job opportunities.	21. Empower government services anchored on integrity and good governance.	8. Provide more affordable houses, Kampung Extension Scheme, Resettlement Scheme, Assistance for longhouses construction and repair works.	3. Guarantee equal rights of all Sarawakians.	25. Improve efficiency in disaster management.
23. Enhance quality of education and technical training.	7. Eradicate urban and rural poverty.		10. Strengthen efforts to protect and conserve the environment.	4. Recognise and guarantee people's rights to Native Customary Right (NCR) land and Native Territorial Domain (NTD).	

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Table 4: (continued)

Sociocultural topic	Economic topic	Political topic	Development topic	Constitutional and legal topic	Border and security topic
26. Strengthen social harmony and well-being.	9. Propel Sarawak's economic development through Digital Economy Agenda.		12. Expand road, transport, port and airport networks.	28. Strengthen Native Court of Sarawak.	
27. Ensure and preserve the culture, heritage and beliefs of all races.	11. Increase Sarawak's income and sources of revenue.		13. Expand water, electricity, and gas supply coverage.	29. Assist and accelerate the process to obtain citizenship for eligible Sarawakians.	
28. Strengthen Native Court of Sarawak.	15. Transform rural economic development.		14. Expand telecommunication coverage and digital facilities.		
30. Care and protect the welfare of the people.	17. Transform and propel the agriculture, livestock and fisheries sectors.		16. Expedite the development of a healthy and smart city.		
31. Empower women involvement in Sarawak development.	18. Develop industrial and investment sectors.		18. Develop industrial and investment sectors.		

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Table 4: (continued)

Sociocultural topic	Economic topic	Political topic	Development topic	Constitutional and legal topic	Border and security topic
33. Enhance sports development.	19. Provide more business opportunities and empower small and medium enterprises. 20. Intensify tourism and services sector.		22. Enhance access and quality of health services. 31. Empower women involvement in Sarawak development. 32. Increase youth participation in Sarawak development.		
	31. Empower women involvement in Sarawak development. 34. Establish a sovereign wealth fund.				

Native Customary Rights (NCR) land and Native Territorial Domain (NTD); and ensuring and preserving the culture, heritage, and belief of all races in Sarawak and enhancing the quality of education in Sarawak took centre stage under the sociocultural topic.

For economic issues, the framework for Sarawak's vision to secure its position as a developed and high-income state by 2030 relies on the PCDS strategy, which was derived from the blueprint of the existing Digital Economy Strategy 2018–2022 (Chung 2022). The manifesto captured the issues of the development of the rural sectors through the transformation of the agriculture, livestock and fisheries sectors while outlining various efforts to boost the state's economy by emphasising technology and digital economy. The all-encompassing economic strategies presented in the manifesto reflected the overall sentiment discussed under the economic topics in the 2018 dataset.

For political issues, the manifesto's first point was GPS' pledge to assure Sarawak's stability and political autonomy. Mirroring the issues of political stability and political autonomy mentioned in the 2018 dataset, the GPS manifesto captured the importance of ensuring Sarawak's rights and interests without intervention from external political parties. Captured in the 2018 dataset, the Sarawak for Sarawakian political discourse highlighted the importance of local-based parties to ensure a stable state government. Numerous Facebook contents captured in the 2018 dataset reiterated the importance of enforcing MA63 by not allowing Peninsular political parties to have branches in Sarawak or contest for seats in Sarawak (*Dayak Daily* 2018). Although not mentioned in the GPS manifesto, the implicit message was clearly articulated by all Sarawak-based political parties during the SSE21—a mutual understanding that, following the spirit of MA63, they should reject all Peninsular-based parties.

In the 2018 dataset, the issues related to Sarawak's development were mostly confined to the discussion on infrastructure and necessities. However, the GPS manifesto in 2021 managed to capture not only the two popular issues but also the importance of the two often missed strata of society namely the women and the youths of Sarawak. GPS pledged to recognise the role of both women and youths of Sarawak as essential assets in the state's development. This is done by providing assistance and opportunities for the two groups under the PCDS strategy.

Undeniably, the constitutional and legal topic was the backbone of the manifesto. In the 2018 dataset, the Facebook content that discussed the Sarawak constitutional and legal issues received high engagement among social media platform users. Perhaps, due to the exposure of the issue by the state government and the attention

given by the Sarawak public, GPS had managed to take advantage of the situation by reinstating the importance of the coalition in ensuring the protection of Sarawak rights.

Finally, the topic of border and security was also mentioned in the 2021 GPS manifesto. Compared to the 2018 data, which primarily discussed safeguarding the Sarawak border and resources, the manifesto managed to tackle one extra issue, which was disaster management. Considering the state's stellar record in tackling the issue of COVID-19 pandemic, the GPS manifesto pledged to continue the effort to improve the state's efficiency in disaster management by strengthening the Sarawak State Disaster Management Committee (SDMC).

## **CONCLUSION**

Sarawak's changing position within Malaysian politics in 2018 had dramatically transformed the way Sarawak realigned its position in the context of federal-state relations. With the change, adjustments were also made regarding the way the state presented its interests in state and national politics. Sarawak politicians and Sarawak political parties were expected to receive continuous support from Sarawakians as locals prefer engaging on locally driven issues from Sarawak-based Facebook pages. The result of this study suggested that the popularity of Borneo-based Facebook pages, particularly Sarawak-based ones, carried weight in determining the support of the public, especially on issues related to the interests of Sarawak.

Six main topics were identified and served as focal points of discussion that formed the online discourse of Sarawak. The topics are sociocultural, economic, political, development, constitutional and legal, and border and security. Among the topics, three main issues have been identified as important for Sarawakians. The issues were: (1) constitutional and legal issues – issues that are related to Sarawak rights, MA63, federal and state constitution; (2) sociocultural issues – regional sentiments that are related to the ideals of being a Sarawakian; and (3) political issues – issues of federal-state relations. As the discussion regarding these issues gained momentum, Sarawakians who were active online were observed to engage in the topics within the framing of their perceived position within the federation. The framing related to their imagined position vis-à-vis Malaysian identity. It is easy to understand why Sarawakians always position their identity as Sarawakians first instead of Malaysian first.

Furthermore, the formation of GPS as a local-based coalition has greatly benefited GPS as it was in line with the coalition's policy of Sarawak First. The policy, which has been identified as a critical factor for GPS' enormous victory in the SSE21, has become the primary framework that shapes the political discourse of Sarawak. The study's result suggested a coherence between the issues that Sarawakians discussed during Sarawak's stint as an opposition state in 2018 and the issues presented in the GPS manifesto during SSE21. The result from SSE21 showed an outright rejection of all Peninsular-based political parties. This situation may have resulted from the change in the Sarawak political scenario in 2021 following the rise of the Sarawak for Sarawakian sentiment popularised by both the governments under Adenan and Abang Jo which was also echoed by all the Sarawak-based political parties during SSE21.

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