Manuscript Title: Rural Democracy and Communitarian Clientelism: A Study in Sik, Kedah, Post-State Elections 2023

Authors: Hazman M.B. Baharom

This is a provisional PDF file of an article that has undergone enhancements after acceptance, such as the addition of a cover page and metadata, and formatting for readability, but it is not yet the definitive version of record. This version will undergo additional copyediting, typesetting and review before it is published in its final form, but we are providing this version to give early visibility of the article.

RURAL DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNITARIAN CLIENTELISM: A STUDY IN SIK, KEDAH, POST-STATE ELECTIONS 2023

Hazman M.B. Baharom

Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan

Email: hazman@akane.waseda.jp

ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the assumption that once democracy is established in a state, it adheres to liberal democratic mechanisms. In contentious rural areas of Malaysia, such as Sik, unique factors like communal politics, grassroots education, and community engagement play a significant role. This study analyzes why certain figures, like Kedah Chief Minister Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, gain popularity despite insufficient explanations from existing theories. Based on original data from in-depth interviews with local political leaders and participant observation, this paper explores the factors influencing voting patterns in Sik and their implications for the wider Kedah region during the 2023 Malaysian State Elections. It applies Weiss's (2019) concept of "clientelism," incorporating a communitarian dimension, leading to the proposition of "communitarian clientelism" to better understand diverse democratic practices.

Keywords: Malaysia; clientelism; community; democracy

INTRODUCTION

The rural district of Sik, located in the state of Kedah, is a primarily agricultural-based region. Official data states that the population of Sik stands at 71,261, with active population that could vote in elections are 63,126 (Pihak Berkuasa Tempatan Negeri Kedah Darul Aman 2024). Following the new inclusion of young voters starting 18 years old in the wake of the 2022 General Elections, the voter population in Sik has increased by 6.6% from 59,183 to 63,126 (Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia 2024). This increase in the influx of new voters, coupled with the information disseminating power of new social media platforms, has contributed to a new trend in the Malaysian voter preferences (Ong 2023, 6-8; Azmil 2023, 8).

As a district with a large majority of its population involved in agricultural-based economic activities, Sik, like any other rural constituencies in Malaysia, was relatively unknown in the Malaysian political map, at least before 17th May 2020 when its native, Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor (hereinafter referred to as "Sanusi") rose to power as the 14th Chief Minister (*Menteri Besar*) of Kedah. Sanusi, who originally hailed from a family of rice farmers and rubber tappers succeeded to create an aura of personality that has influenced political discussions at the national level through his style of "carefree" and seemingly "no holds barred" rhetoric on the political podium. This kind of sudden rise of personal popularity at the national level has prompted some pundits to equate him with figures like Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte (Leong 2023, 5). Due partly to the post-2020 rise in popularity of Sanusi, the district has earned a considerably heightened focus in national political discussions.

In addition, there are other political factors that made Sik a location that deserves a deeper political analysis too. The population in the district managed to change their political loyalty in each and every election since around 25 years ago. The term "political loyalty" here is defined as preference of a certain political party during elections, and to illustrate the changing sentiment, the data of winning parties since the year 1986 is shown in the Schedule A below:

General Election Year Seat: P.013 Sik	Winning Candidate	Party
1986 (seat first created)	Zainol Abidin Johari	Barisan Nasional (BN)
1990	Abdul Hamid Othman	
1995		
1999	Shahnon Ahmad	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS)
2004	Wan Azmi Wan Ariffin	Barisan Nasional (BN)
2008	Che Uda Che Nik	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS)
2013	Mansor Abd Rahman	Barisan Nasional (BN)
2018	Ahmad Tarmizi Sulaiman	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS)
2022		

Schedule A.

Based on the above data outlining the election results of the Parliamentary seat of Sik and adding together the landslide victory of PAS in the two state seats that made up the Parliamentary seat, namely the N23 Belantik and N24 Jeneri seats in the state elections in August 2023, it could be generalized that the PAS political achievements in the district has been solidified—moving from strength to strength. I would like to focus on the contributions of the actions and small-scale programs implemented by the local party machinery which are largely embedded into the religious, educational, and community programs contributing to this development.

The specific questions that this paper wishes to answer are (1) what was the underlying societal factor that propelled the winning parties to achieve their goals during recent General Elections and State Elections in Sik, and (2) how do local political actors and leaders understand the democratic dynamics in the district? Most analyses boil down their explanations of the electoral trend simply in the form of an almost zero-sum game between PAS and UMNO (i.e. UMNO losing support, therefore PAS gains) (Welsh 2023), the rhetoric of the so-called "green wave" underscored by racial and religious appeal (Azmil 2023), and the unhappiness of the electorate towards the seriousness of the Anwar

Ibrahim-led government in governance issues (Abdul Rashid 2023). However, I would argue that the operations of PAS in Sik is richer than that—it does not operate solely as a political party proper but represents an effect of a deliberate long-term effort of building trust within the society characterized by interpersonal relationships and cultural production involving the dynamics of personal values present in that society.

The operations of the two biggest and visibly existing political parties in Sik, namely PAS and UMNO are closely related and inextricably tied to the cultural nexus of the rural populations in that area. Having said that, political maneuvering by both players in this duopolistic competition should be seen as not merely a normal process of getting votes whenever an election comes. Party politics is embedded within the local culture, invisibly present beneath the veneer of the sacred and profane lives of the populace. Data collection on this interconnected nexus of culture and politics among different political parties in Sik, and that election outcomes are primarily an expression of that process (Sanusi, Khairy & Shahril, 2023), were done using several methodologies.

First, in-depth interviews were conducted in August 2023 and October 2023 with local leaders of various political parties that are currently active in Sik at the time of writing. The timing of the interview was just two weeks after the aftermath of the state elections, so that these political leaders could supply fresh information related to their campaigning strategies at the local level. To help compare and contrast the experience by the different components of the respective political parties, in-depth interviews were done consciously and actively including with women leaders from the parties. The individual participants of the interviews with their political party credentials are listed below:

Participant	Post, Party, and Activities
Ustazah Norhasimah Abdul Rahman	Chief, Dewan Muslimat PAS Sik; Treasurer, Dewan Muslimat PAS Kedah.
Ustazah Saemah Abdul Rahman	Deputy Chief, Dewan Muslimat PAS Sik.
Mazli Saipi	Chief, Wanita Parti Amanah Negara Sik; contested for Belantik state seat in State

	Elections 2023 and lost.
Maizatul Akmam Osman	Chief, Wanita UMNO Sik; contested for P013 Sik Parliamentary seat in General Elections 2022 and lost.
Muhammad Ismadi Abdul Kadir	Chief, Parti Peribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU) Sik; Special Officer to the Chief Minister of Kedah.
Mohd Shahiful Md Nasir	Chief, Dewan Pemuda PAS Sik (on leave since November 2022 due to remarks about "going to hell for not supporting PAS" during the GE 2022 campaign).
Mohd Khizri Abu Kasim	Chief, UMNO Sik; contested against Sanusi for the N24 Jeneri state seat in the State Elections 2023 and lost.

Schedule B

By obtaining data from different leaders among both traditional genders—men and women—of rival political parties competing in the same electorate, we hope to reach a more holistic view of the situation from the perspective of the political players themselves. Interview data have been coded at both the primary and secondary levels accordingly and informed the analysis of this paper. Simultaneously, since some political parties, such as PAS, are basing their movement on party ideology, strategies of community engagement and party recruitment must be understood through their ideological bases, namely the sources, syllabus, and processes of ideology formation. Some relevant data from sources of PAS's ideology have been referred to as the context that became the basis of party mobilization.

Secondly, to corroborate the findings from interview data, participant observations have been done in several community hotspots in Sik during the two weeks period before the state election in 2023 and two weeks after that. Observations were done by participating in rallies of different parties and their information centers scattered around the district in

the days approaching election day. Additional set of observations were performed in Sik in April-May 2024, especially during the Hari Raya Aidilfitri holiday period. Social events by different political parties in conjunction with the celebration were observed to connect the social aspect of party activities with their political appeal among the masses. As such, I aim to establish an observation of on-ground political culture of the populace of Sik living in various rural settings. As such, a richer picture of the political decision-making process of the populace, partly influenced by political party activities, can be observed and characterized.

Current Explanations of Electoral Trends

Due to the relatively enormous success of the Perikatan Nasional coalition—it has been almost a mainstream explanation that the Malay-Muslim voters are becoming more consolidated, akin to an *en bloc* voting behavior. Experts have called this phenomenon using names such as the "Green Wave" (Azmil, 2023). This phenomenon is marked by trends such as a desire for a predominantly Malay-Muslim leadership, a dissatisfaction with the perceived incompetencies of the federal government in relation to "defending Islam," and an alleged prejudice towards the non-Malay leaders. In short, it assumes a certain form of national imagination (or imaginations) that should be in place for Malaysia, and this ideal has been distorted by the political leadership of the current administration. Hence, it is imperative for the voters to vote for a realization of these national imaginations, however unclear or far from consistent they are.

However, the assumption of this *en bloc* behavior among the Malay-Muslim population needs to be considered further, especially in light of the differences in demographic settings, economic activities, and political expectations on the ground. In states where the Malay-Muslim population forms a majority such as Kedah and Kelantan, and in Terengganu where PN won all seats with no opposition at all (SPR, 2024), it would be natural to assume a similar motivation across these different electoral regions. However, unless an observation is done on the ground, the specific reasons for voting cannot be identified. Using the case of Sik, I would argue that the "Green Wave" phenomenon, albeit can be a suitable term to generalize a voting trend, is still insufficient as an

explanatory device. The voting motivations are varied, and in many cases, are tied to rural communal culture.

Besides, there are current explanations that are based on an individual politician's reputation. For example, the clout and popularity surrounding Sanusi and his exchanging fire with the top guns in Anwar's administration, such as Saifuddin Nasution, the Minister of Home Affairs, and Rafizi Ramli, the Minister of Economy, through his social media posts and during the election campaign speeches added to his image of a "fighter" that speaks for the "common people." Not only that, Sanusi's image of a courageous leader was further strengthened when he exchanged criticism with Tengku Ismail Ibrahim, the Regent of Johor over issues concerning the management of national and state football teams on social media. Even though these exchanges are not strictly related to state politics, it managed to construct a desired image of Sanusi as a leader of the common folks, not of the "elites." In addition, one can see a parallel with the discourse of populism here, when Sanusi is projecting himself as equal with the people and antagonistic towards "the elites" through his activities in villages displayed on his social media accounts (Muller 2016). For example, on 6th December 2022, his official Facebook account posted a picture of him in the paddy field, or on 5th September 2022, he posted a photo of himself harvesting *petai*; and on 8th December 2021, he posted a picture of his lunch, which was a plate of rice, fried eggs, salted fish, and soy sauce (Facebook, 2021, 2022).

In addition, unpopular policies that have been instituted by Anwar's administration caused justifiable dissatisfaction among the voters. On social media such as TikTok, videos of Anwar's political speech from past elections that promised to reduce petrol prices as soon as he becomes the Prime Minister circulated widely, thus making the reputation of his administration among the local people in Sik to be compromised for the worse as "tidak menepati janji" (never fulfilled his promises). Overall, current analysis of trends pointed towards the Malay-Muslim voting trend as almost an *en bloc* behavior due to their dissatisfaction with how the government handled issues concerning religion and race and individual popularity factors.

Based on my in-depth interviews, albeit both of the aforementioned factors emerged as

explanations of the voting trends in Sik, there are other more structurally and locally entrenched factors that could upend the grip of UMNO in Sik, resulting in a locality with PAS as a more dominant local political force. As displayed in Schedule A above, the area was previously volatile where PAS and UMNO fought each other for dominance, but it started to gradually gravitate towards PAS in the wake of the 2018 elections and consistently continued till now. To explain the mechanism of cause and effect behind the process of PAS gaining a stronger foothold in Sik in a gradual manner, explanations that hinge upon individual popularity and an *en bloc* voting behavior is insufficient.

In the case of PAS in Sik, there are at least three important aspects of merging the social fabric with party politics. First, community-based activities that are non-political but managed to assist the party in their campaigning and recruitment processes. Secondly, the non-political youth activities geared towards creating rapport among the youth, and finally, the utilization of local organic institutions of society, such as religious and educational institutions. PAS's long-term strategies that strengthened their foothold in Sik can be understood through these aspects.

To analyze these strategies, I propose to use the concept of "communitarian clientelism," which extends Weiss's (2020, 2022) concept of clientelism as a demand and supply function in Malaysian politics. While clientelism in general refers to the process of the relationship between client and suppliers in terms of material goods and services, it could be expanded to apply a communitarian dimension to it, when the defining factor lies on the lines of different community needs which are not necessarily material or financial in nature.

Clientelism and Its Communitarian Manifestation

Generally, the literature surrounding clientelism is based on the premise that there are transactional exchanges involving a dyad of client-patron relationships. As indicated in Scott's (1972) classic writings on clientelist politics in Southeast Asia, provisions of necessities will be supplied by the political patrons, and through various social forces, the clients will supply them with the required political support (Hicken, 2011).

While acknowledging the concept of "money politics" within the ambit of clientelism is "conceptually hazy", Weiss (2016) further classified types of clientelist politics in Malaysia into "microparticularistic patronage" and "mesoparticularistic club goods"—which respectively refer to provision of specific individual needs and embarking on development projects in a community. For Dettman and Weiss (2018), these provisions refer to a combination of programmatic promises and ideological messaging that distribute costs and benefits among the citizens.

Weiss (2019) commented further that clientelistic relationships enforces "performance legitimacy, even generating a moral obligation to reciprocity and not just limited to instrumental functions of politics. One example of programmatic clientelist programs would include the 1Malaysia project, and at the societal level, the activities of Muslimat PAS of house-to-house visiting during elections.

Weiss's (2019) analysis of clientelism is further deepened through how the clientelist networks between different political parties constitute a complex of "competitive electoral authoritarian" system done through fiscal patronage and affective ties, where the resources can be material, ideological, moral persuasion, and social connections. Especially after the 2008 General Elections, the competing parties of BN and PR strived to display themselves as the "better provider" to the clients. In a more general sense, Ufen (2012, 2020) compared the clientelistic competition involving material resources provided by UMNO against the more ideological ones provided by PAS.

Most arguments centering around Malaysian clientelist politics centers around a relationship of "exchanges" between favors—benefits for votes. Exchanges are often linear in nature, where one party gives and the other party receives, and there is reciprocity (Ravanella et al., 2022; Hicken et al., 2022). However, rural politics in many parts of Malaysia would require further explanations, especially the logic of value between societal activities and political establishments.

As a political theory, communitarianism refers to a concept where the system of values is

differently defined and understood in relation to communities (Bell, 2024). Following these systems of values, clientelist connections can be imagined differently than an exchange of favors. Exchanges can happen without necessarily involving any foreseeable benefits to the participants because the value system makes it palatable to participate in (Walzer, 1990).

Hence, Walzer's (1983) analyses on communitarian political values are important because they hinge upon the way value systems are constructed. According to Enke (2020), voting can be viewed as a way to protect communal values in the United States. In observing PAS's strengthening influence in Sik, the appeal to communal values is apparent considering the political strategies at play.

As a concept, "communitarian clientelism" can be used to further analyze the relationship between the demand and supply of political support in the context of Sik, being a combination of clientelist relations and communitarian understanding of values.

PAS's Long-Term Strategies

Old, broad-based political parties such as PAS are accompanied by enormous grassroot activists from all walks of life. Such is the privilege enjoyed by another old political party too—UMNO. These activists are mostly not officially party members, but they are actively involved in their activities and even assist the campaigns of the respective parties. PAS, for instance, has always boasted themselves as a party that is being supported by volunteers as their main workers, with the oft-repeated mantra "the money for the political work of the party is in the pockets of the party members and volunteers."

Besides, the non-political activities conducted by PAS youth in some respects managed to attract support from the younger generation of voters. For example, sports tournaments and motorcycle riding convoys led by PAS leaders, coupled with the optics of Sanusi as an amateur all-rounder sportsman proved to affect how the youth look at him as a person and politician. During the campaign events for SE 2023, friendly football matches were

organized by PAS in Sik targeted for youths coming from different villages. Outside of the football teams themselves, many of them attended just to be spectators, specifically to witness Sanusi as one of the players in the games (participant observation, 2023).

More importantly, such community activities are not done only during the election season. Sports tournaments organized by PAS are an annual fare in the district. According PAS youth leaders themselves, they see these activities as an indispensable effort to "be close" to their target population. In the words of Mohd Shahiful Md Nasir, the chief of Pemuda PAS Kawasan Sik ("Sik PAS Youth"):

> We do activities that are loved by the youths, and *we don't talk about politics when we are doing it*. For example, we organize sports tournaments, and through that tournament, we could get to know each other better. When they join in our activities and they see us with them doing things they like, they will feel more belonged; they will see that we are with them always. [Emphasis mine]

Shahiful, a full-time pharmacist at Klinik Kesihatan Sik ("Sik Public Health Clinic") credits the consistent community activities by the different wings of the party, such as the Youth and Women's wings as the causes for why the local community in the district supports the party.

For many rural folks in Sik, community programs associated with religious institutions such as mosques and *menaksah* (or "surau," typically smaller than mosques and usually does not hold Friday prayers) are integral components of the fabric of everyday lives. There, the distinction between the sacred and the profane blurs, and in the space and moment of these programs, community members could alternate between the sacred world of religion and the profane world of community activities almost seamlessly. In Sik, some mosques and *menaksah* are unofficially associated with political parties—with some of them being led by PAS members, and some others by UMNO members (Participant observation, 2023).

In carrying out activities associated with religious institutions such as funeral rites for the

locals, weekly Friday prayers, Hari Raya prayers and gatherings, *korban* ceremonies et cetera, the locals could talk to each other and build communal bonds at a personal level with the institution's leaders. In the days leading up to the SE 2023, I observed talks among the locals that UMNO leaders seldom see them in the villages, but PAS leaders, even though they lost the previous elections, are always seen among the local community (Participant observation, 2023). A survey of Sanusi's social media account showed how he tried to construct a public image that he is always physically "present" with the people.

Through small steps aimed at building interpersonal relationships with local community, successes currently enjoyed by PAS in Sik is significantly contributed by the efficacy of their long-term strategies. By combining different types of community organization strategies aimed at different levels of society, they improve their chances of being seen not as a mere "political party," but a vehicle for social connection, welfare, and cohesion. Due to the trust and support built among the locals, PAS has managed to slowly mobilize its various components to ensure that welfare provisions are not limited to election times. In Sik, parties that function as "welfare providers" beyond physical welfare, specifically involving social connections and communal togetherness will have a higher chance of getting votes (Dettman & Weiss, 2018).

However, in a larger context of rural Malaysia, the connection between parties as "welfare providers" and their support levels is more nuanced. Between the year 2004 to 2023, the support for PAS in the state of Kelantan has improved and remains strong. In the neighboring state of Terengganu, PAS managed to wrest the state in the 2018 elections and the support for the party has only improved since, evidenced by the total win of all Parliamentary seats in the 2022 election and all state assembly seats in 2023 by the PN coalition (SPR, 2025). PAS was not in the Federal Government for the most part in this period (excepting 2020-2022), and the federal administration announced many projects and development initiatives to woo the locals but ultimately failed.

Hence, an explanation beyond the material-based welfare connections is needed. Mutual connections between parties and society should be analyzed beyond give-and-take politics. They are embedded in a complex of values and how society understands it. Most

evidently, in all developmental measures, Kelantan has remained stagnant (Department of Statistics, 2025), but the support for PAS is as strong as ever (See Appendix A below). In Kelantan, almost the same configuration of rural activities has been going on in many localities, making the locals identify PAS as the only legitimate choice within their value system. Part of the reason for this trend is the weekly religious activities such as the Medan Ilmu Lecture in Kota Bharu every Friday morning and other smaller scale combination of local activities that combine the sacred and profane fabrics of social lives led by PAS.

In Terengganu, the Friday Morning Lecture at Masjid Rusila by Abdul Hadi Awang that has been going on for more that 40 years without fail managed to create a significant "third space" (Oldenburg, 2023), among the rural Muslim communities in their complex of social values. Add this to the organic connectedness of PAS machinery in the local day-to-day institutions, the political party stops being merely a political party, but a maintainer and producer of societal values.

Women Religious Politics

As PAS's women's wing, the Dewan Muslimat has been one of the most active Muslim political movements in Malaysia. Many of their modus operandi are kept "hidden" behind the spotlight, utilizing their organically recruited unpaid local activists among the local women through various small-scale community-based activities (Kloos 2020). That these activities are done in a systematic way are frequently passed as non-political and local-based religious activities in many observations is important to explore—how seemingly personal and non-political activities of local Muslim women could assist a political objective in the long term.

In Sik, the *Dewan Muslimat* has been focusing on small-scale mobilizations since their establishment in the district in 1997 (interview, 2023). Their activities of attracting political support, party recruitment, and small-scale dissemination of Islamic political ideals do not exist independently of each other. They are characterized by specific modus

operandi, syllabus and methods of religious interpretations, and ideas about *dakwah* (religious propagation) that could be located within a broader context of the Islamist mobilization strategies (Farish, 2014; Abdul Hadi, 2020).

In Peninsular Malaysia, rural women's politics have always been the battleground between two biggest Malay political parties—Wanita UMNO/Puteri UMNO versus the Dewan Muslimat PAS. The Dewan Muslimat exists at almost all Malay-majority localities in the country (Zaireeni, 2016). Aside from being an avenue for women's political participation, Dewan Muslimat is responsible in recruiting women into supporting the party through various modus operandi including *usrah*, women education, community programs, and so on. In a similar vein, their arch-rivals, namely Wanita and Puteri UMNO, are also using similar methods, albeit in the case of Sik, their appeal is increasingly lackluster. The answer to how PAS women could overtake UMNO women in political appeal could partly explain PAS's increasingly strong foothold in Sik.

Local- and small-scale activities of the Dewan Muslimat can be classified into two different categories, namely the *usrah* system and community-based religious activities involving women and the youth. Through these programs, a longer lasting bond with the local community in the name of community service and religion could be forged akin to familial ties beyond forms of reciprocal loyalty in the context of electoral politics (McLaughlin, 2015).

i)   *Usrah* and local activities

The *usrah* is a hallmark of many modern Islamist movements when it comes to recruitment and alignment of ideology. Derived from the Arabic, the terminology speaks to its Middle Eastern origins. Modern implementation of the *usrah* system among Malaysian Islamist groups, i.e. not limited to PAS alone, are local adaptations of the practice of the Muslim Brotherhood as outlined by its founder, Hasan al-Banna in his famous *Uṣūl al-ʿIshrīn* ("The Twenty Basic Ideas"), *Majmūʿat al-Rasāʾil* ("Collection of Epistles"), and others. In Malaysia, the *usrah* has been adapted according to the local context as expounded by prominent Islamist leaders such as Saari Sungib, Abdul Hadi

Awang, and Abdullah Zaik Abd Rahman.

Generally, the *usrah* involves study groups at regular intervals, usually on a weekly basis. They are led by a *naqīb* (lit. "leader") appointed by the party. Among university students, selecting members to join the *usrah* normally involves specific strategies led by campus party leaders (*tanẓīm*). However, in the rural context, it will usually be predicated under community socio-religious activities. There are three general levels of *usrah* in the standard operation of PAS, namely *taʿrīf* ("introduction"), *takwīn* ("moulding"), and *tanfīdh* ("implementation"). Each and every level has its own dedicated syllabus and their guidebooks published by the party headquarters, and the final objective expected of the members joining the highest level of *tanfīdh* is to work for the party in their own personal capacities (Lajnah Tarbiyah & Perkaderan PAS Pusat, 2018).

Usrah is standard practice at all levels, from kindergarten and school levels up to the top brass of the party. In terms of the syllabus used, the standard would be works by Fathi Yakan, Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, Abdul Hadi Awang, and other well-known figures, with different intensities according to the participant levels. For example, school-level *usrah* might only discuss the beginning parts of Fathi Yakan's *Mā Dhā Yaʿnī Intimā' li'l-Islām* ("What Does It Mean to Embrace Islam?"), but for university students, several books are used simultaneously (auto-ethnography, 2011-2014).

Among the uninitiated who are still not familiar with the ideology of the party and Islamism in general, the beginner level of *taʿrīf* will primarily focus on the basic ideas of Islam (understanding the five pillars of Islam and six pillars of faith, improving personal piety, and emphasizing on serving the society). Upon completing the first level, they will progress to the intermediate level of *takwīn* and finally the advanced level of *tanfīdh*. Here, the participants will be invited to ritually join the party through performing the *bayʿah* ("pledge") in front of a representative of the party leadership (Lajnah Tarbiyah, 2018; auto-ethnography, 2011).

The Dewan Muslimat's local-based recruitment practices fall under the level of *taʿrīf* since majority of the participants are still unfamiliar with the *usrah* system and its

accompanying ideology. Through community programs such as small-scale *kenduri* (feast) at any house in the village, the Dewan Muslimat can create bonds of piety with local women. A well-loved local *ustazah* (female Islamic teacher) will give short sermons with topics unrelated to partisan politics, but rather a general admonition about the importance of remembering God and following the precepts of the religion.

In rural Malay communities, communal gathering involving food, short sermons, and remembrance of God is vital. It ranges from the usual *kenduri doa selamat* (feast to supplicate for prosperity) after 'Ishā' prayers at individual houses, *kenduri aqiqah* (feast to celebrate newborn baby), *kenduri arwah* (feast to pray for the deceased), up to the management of *kenduri kahwin* (wedding ceremony). As for the *kenduri kahwin*, the common utensils for cooking, tents, chairs and tables for guests are usually borrowed from the local UMNO or PAS offices (participant observation, 2023, 2024). It is the organic interweaving of political movements and the everyday sacred-profane fabric of the community lives that makes the configuration of rural politics different, at least when compared to the comparatively policy-based politics in the urban seats.

Within PAS mobilization strategies, *usrah* is always a calculated and consistent move beyond "touch-and-go" community activities. In addition to serving recruitment objectives, it is also a tool to be close to the local community. Furthermore, the funding will almost always come from the coffers of the party members. According to Ustazah Saemah Abdul Rahman:

> The strength or PAS lies in the *tarbiyyah* ("education") and the *usrah*. When we conduct *usrah*, we are giving *tarbiyyah* to the listeners, and that is how our members expand. From just a small number of branches, now Dewan Muslimat could expand into a lot more branches. Now we have more than 70 branches in Sik alone…[sic] in the *usrah*, our focus is personal improvement and to be close to the community in the village. *All our members started with usrah*, and *now we are reaping the sweetness* [emphasis mine] when many of them assist our campaigns.

Then, Ustazah Norhasimah Abdul Rahman added thus:

> For the older generation, the *usrah* usually involves [reciting *Surah*] *Yasin*, but now, we have specific syllabus to use…[sic] Our local *usrah* are encouraged to be done through a house-to-house method. More people can come compared to if we hold them at our *markaz* ("party activity center"). In houses, we can hold feasts and eat together.

Even though PAS did not have a clear prospect of winning elections back in 1997 when they first established Dewan Muslimat in Sik, they already had a long-term objective through inculcation of ideas and interpersonal relationships with the locals. These are recurring themes throughout interviews, not only with the two leaders of Dewan Muslimat in Sik, but also with Pemuda PAS, that they started off in the 1990's by not having an objective of winning in the short run. They aimed to build rapport with the locals first. As a consequence, the party machinery managed to seamlessly operate alongside the day-to-day consciousness of society.

Despite having slim chances of winning elections in the 1990's, their prime motivation is religious in nature, as corroborated by women chiefs of UMNO and Amanah, their rivals. Maizatul Akmam Osman, the Wanita UMNO chief, mentioned how "religious issues are being utilized to bolster the support [for PAS]. Some people are attracted to PAS due to their religious motivations and orientations" (interview, 2023). Simultaneously, Mazli Saipi, the chief of Wanita Amanah Sik, lamented that "PAS has created a sentiment that they are synonymous with religion, and it is hard for us to break that among the locals" (interview, 2023).

In retrospect, usage of religious discourses associated with PAS might be taken too far, exemplified by the viral comments made by Mohd Shahiful on 10th November 2022 that got viral on cyberspace, when he mentioned that those who voted against PAS will "go to hellfire." Mohd Khizri Abu Kasim, the Chief of UMNO in Sik, expressed his concern that this symptom is not a new phenomenon:

> This way of thinking is not new. It started in kindergarten, this kind of doctrine. They [PAS] have schools such as PASTI, SRITI, and so on. If you look closely, you will know

that they have planted this kind of doctrine in the past 40 years. When you grow up with that idea repeated all over again, you'll only think in that way about religion and politics.

In a nutshell, the local-based activities by PAS are successful in influencing the sentiments of the community. Through house-to-house activities and community bonding, PAS women could then forge a communal bond with their electorates primarily consisting of women. This strategy is utilized to garner the support of children, siblings, and their husbands. Of course, the success rate could not be guaranteed, but it merits consideration that communal bonds could be translated into political support.

ii)   Local programs involving women, the youth, and the elderly.

In collaboration with other group of PAS-affiliated institutions such as the *Pusat Asuhan Tunas Islam* (PASTI), a PAS-run kindergarten widely spread across Peninsular Malaysia, Dewan Muslimat and Dewan Pemuda PAS could expand their access to women and children. For example, the Dewan Muslimat holds programs such as sports and recreation involving families of the local communities. Plus, the Dewan Pemuda will then corroborate this effort through holding youth-friendly activities such as motorbike rides which appeals to the youth. Sanusi's former Political Secretary, now MP for Alor Star, Afnan Hamimi, and Nurul Amin Hamid (MP for Padang Terap) are actively involved in leading and organizing nationwide youth motorbike rides. PAS saw an opportunity to recruit youngsters following the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 years old in 2021 (Parliamentary Hansard, 2021), and they grabbed it.

Plus, the Dewan Muslimat are active in executing activities targeted to the youngsters. According to Ustazah Norhasimah:

For the youth, we have activities under our subsidiaries like Ameerah [youth wing of Dewan Muslimat]. For them, we don't do traditional *usrah* like the older generation. Theirs are open *usrah*s such as hiking, going to parks and beaches, and so on. This is how we attract the youth so that we can make them understand [about Islam]. The *topics of our conversation are non-political*. [Emphasis mine].

Based on their explanation, recruiting members of PAS, or at least making them sympathetic with PAS' struggle, is achieved not through direct political campaigns, but through community bonding. The bond-building strategies are segmented according to relevant target groups including women, children, teenagers, youth, and even the elderly. Acknowledging that Malaysian youths' political awareness is achieved differently than the elderly generations, the Dewan Muslimat is calculative in attracting the youth through activities that they like, not through political rhetorics.

Furthermore, among the elderly generation, the rural educational culture of the *pondok* cannot be underestimated in their role as a bridge towards PAS politics. At least 11 traditional *pondok* institutions exist in Sik alone. Most, if not all, are affiliated or expressing support for PAS in politics. The relevance of these institutions lies not only in the process of educating future religious scholars or teachers among the young, but as safe havens for the elderly. Most of the *pondoks* will hold weekly gatherings targeted for this group. In the gatherings, the Tok Guru ("senior teacher," equivalent to a *kiai* in Indonesian *pesantren*s) reads religious texts written in the Jawi script for them to learn the religion together. As a space, it becomes an avenue to bond the elderly regardless of gender. Some *pondok* in Sik even have special dormitories intended for the elderly to stay, learn, and bond (interview & participant observation, 2024). They might not have political motives as primary objectives when establishing these institutions, but in the long run, it could function as part of a community-based assistance program that slowly translates into political sentiments.

The *pondok*'s existential function is not limited to providing public educational and welfare resources. They serve as symbolic resources for PAS's political legitimacy endorsed by the generally religious masses. In Sik, a time-honored tradition is that, on the nomination day before every election campaign period begins, PAS candidates and their supporters will march from Pondok Rahmaniah, Pekan Sik to the election nomination center located at Pejabat Majlis Daerah Sik ("Sik District Council Office"). Upon announcement of election results, regardless of if they win or lose, PAS candidates will greet supporters at Pondok Ubudiah, Sungai Pau (participant observation, 2023). These

gestures function as a symbol that displays how closely the political activities of PAS interweave with local communal institutions.

Local *pondok* institutions fulfill the high demand for religious education that is accessible to all. In the process, participants of the *pondok*-organized programs will be acclimatized to PAS as a political party of their choice, proving the "communitarian clientelist" relationship between the populace and these educational institutions.

Electioneering and Communal Affiliations

Although Sik has an overwhelming majority of the Malay population, the Siamese are one significant minority in many villages across the district. From the perspective of local political operators, parties will often frame their respective electioneering strategies according to community preferences.

At least after GE 1999, in Sik, the majority Malay population are divided between groups that support PAS and groups that support UMNO with more or less equal strengths. In the wake of the GE 2008, the support of the non-Malays, especially the Chinese population (~1.5%) shifted to the opposition coalition resulting in former teacher Che Uda Che Nik winning the Parliamentary seat of P013 Sik with a slim majority of 481 votes. Subsequently, he was defeated in GE 2013 by BN candidate Mansor Abd Rahman with a majority of 2,807 votes (SPR, 2025).

Looking at the vote counts, in a first-past-the-post electoral system, the winner in Sik must be significantly influenced by minority populations. Other than the Chinese and the Indians, the Siamese population in Sik could be regarded as a significant minority, with official statistics recording their numbers in Sik as around 5.3%. Albeit the small percentage, at a micro-level, their votes matter (Gill et al., 2016). Historically, Siamese communities typically vote in a bloc voting style with a consistent preference for UMNO up until GE 2018. According to the locals, this is due to the generous policies by UMNO, including regarding them as part of the Bumiputra community with constitutional

privileges under the first Mahathir Mohamad's administration.

Acknowledging this trend, PAS strategists geared up engagement with the Siamese community as early as 2008 under the administration of Azizan Abd Razak as the Chief Minister of Kedah. According to Muhammad Ismadi Abdul Kadir who served as Special Officer to Azizan and now to Sanusi:

> Since Ustaz Azizan became the Menteri Besar in 2008, we knew that getting the votes from the Siamese community is a challenge. He was the first Menteri Besar that created a special unit under the state government known as Unit Hal Ehwal Orang Siam ("Siamese People Affairs Unit") with me as the Head. *It was created with a purpose to engage and to quickly solve the issues that they face. In the long run, we want to get bloc votes from them or at least reduce their votes for UMNO.* [Emphasis mine]

Muhammad Ismadi (affectionately known as "Paklong Madi" among the locals) mentioned that the complicated state bureaucracy made it difficult for issues of the Siamese community to be solved in a swift and efficient manner, including issues related to land ownership documents that have been pending for years to the agony of the community (interview, 2023). That the land ownership issue has been played well by BERSATU has been corroborated by Mohd Khizri, the UMNO Chief of Sik in our interview. Paklong Madi was glad to hold the position because he could "solve their issues swiftly and gain their trust." Electoral campaigns became relatively easier. However, he still faced an obstacle—he is from PAS, an Islamic party, while the majority of the Siamese are Buddhists.

In 2017, Parti Peribumi Bersatu Malaysia ("Malaysian United Indigenous Party") or BERSATU was successfully registered by Mahathir Mohamad and Mahiaddin Yassin. Paklong Madi made a decision, with "blessings from Sanusi himself" to switch his party to BERSATU, aiming at influencing the Siamese votes. He reckoned that the Siamese people in Kedah are generally indebted to Mahathir's administration. Since he is from BERSATU, it makes sense for them to switch votes from UMNO to BERSATU, or at least breaking down their *en bloc* support for UMNO. In our interview, he proudly

credited his strategy of breaking down the Siamese votes to be the reason why all the three seats in Sik, namely P013 Sik, N23 Belantik, and N24 Jeneri were wrested by PAS in GE 2018, again maintaining them in GE 2022 and SE 2023 (interview, 2023).

Knowing the trends among the Siamese minority and Malay majority in Sik, Paklong Madi with his other political operators are aware that as long as the trend continues, a broken *en bloc* votes among the Siamese community will mean a loss for UMNO (and in the highest probability, a win for PAS). Even though in 2018, BERSATU was a part of the PH coalition, the political climate in Sik made it impossible for PH to get a significant number of votes. Therefore, a vote for PH will indirectly mean a gain for PAS in a three-way contest of 2018.

Their electioneering approach that has successfully influenced the outcomes of elections is also acknowledged by the UMNO leadership in Sik. Mohd Khizri, the defeated candidate against Sanusi in SE 2023 admitted that:

> Yes, in the past, it can be said that 100% of the Siamese population supported BN and UMNO. But recently, there were opposition political leaders that wanted to win against BN using sensitive issues like rights to own land and property among the non-Malay Bumiputeras [...] when people come and promise that they will support your ethnic group, who wouldn't like it? (Interview, 2023)

In the rural Malay (and Siamese community) contexts, contrary to liberal assumptions which focuses on individual voters as decision-makers, on-the-ground evidence suggests that the rural society in Sik may be thinking differently. Using the intimate experience of Paklong Madi as PAS' and BERSATU's political operator, votes among the population in Sik are more significantly decided by voters' affiliation to their respective villages, life history, and ethnic memberships. Without dismissing the fact that there are votes based solely on individual choices, party strategies in Sik are geared toward communities more, not individuals.

Plus, among the rural population, other variables that characterize party differences

include which *kampung* (participant observation, 2018, 2022, 2023) the person is living in and which mosque the person is praying at (distinction between "masjid PAS" and "masjid UMNO" is increasingly becoming insignificant in recent years compared to the post- "Amanat Haji Hadi era" of the mid-1980's). By analyzing campaign and electioneering strategies from the perspective of an integral member of Sanusi's team, we could understand their approach to navigate the way the population in Sik practices their democratic rights.

Conclusion

Based on the data from in-depth interviews, participant observations, and analysis of local political rhetoric, PAS has successfully utilized their presence among the grassroots to project a long run community engagement for decades since the 1990's. Besides, deep understanding among their political operators on the voting behavior of the locals suggests a more nuanced voting decisions beyond liberal assumptions.

Besides, activities managed by the rivaling political parties, including PAS and UMNO, in collaboration with mostly non-political institutions, managed to slowly develop local political sentiments that could be translated into votes. I offered an explanation on how PAS utilized social interactions in the rural context to gain trust and build rapport with the local communities. PAS serves the demands of their clients beyond material and personal affective touch—a sense of community and social connections constituting the matrix of personal values. In short, a relationship of communitarian clientelism.

Appendix A: Comparison of PAS Electoral Achievements in Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu

Election Year	State					
	Kedah		Kelantan		Terengganu	
	PAS Parliament Seats	PAS State Seats	PAS Parliament Seats	PAS State Seats	PAS Parliament Seats	PAS State Seats
1990	0	1	6	24	1	8
1995	0	2	6	23	1	7
1999	7	12	10	41	7	28
2004	1	5	6	23	0	4
2008	6	16	8	38	1 (+1 in by-election 2009)	8
2013	1	10	9	32	4	14
2018	3	15	9	37	6	22
2022	9	N/A	9	N/A	7	N/A
2023 (State)	N/A	33	N/A	37	N/A	27

Source: SPR, 2025.

Acknowledgements

Selected Bibliography

Awang, Abdul Hadi. *al-Kharitah al-Siyasiyyah wa'l-Sira' bayna Marakiz al-Quwa fi Maliziya.* Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Permata Ummah, 2020.

—. *Mukhtasar Tarikh al-Harakah al-Islamiyah fi Maliziya.* Kuala Lumpur: PAS Pusat, 2020.

Azmi, Zaireeni. "Women's Participation in Decision Making: The Case of Muslimat in Party Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS)." *International Journal of Management and Applied Science* 2, no. 12 (2016): 170-175.

Doorn-Harder, Pieternella van. "Controlling the Body: Muslim Feminists Debating Women's Rights in Indonesia." *Religion Compass*, 2008: 1021-1043.

Kloos, David. "Personal Touch: Professional Style: Women in Malaysian Islamist Politics." In *Towards a New Malaysia? The 2018 Election and Its Aftermath*, by Meredith L. Weiss and Faisal S. Hazis, 170-191. Singapore: NUS Press, 2020.

Leong, Pauline Pooi Yin. "Political Polarisation Marked Malaysia's Recent State Elections." *ISEAS Perspectives* 2023, no. 84 (2023): 1-11.

Mamat, Ismail bin. "Transmission of Islamic Reform (Islah) from Egypt to Malaysia: A Study." *International Journal of Business, Economics and Law* 10, no. 5 (2016): 23-30.

McLaughlin, Levi. "Komeito's Soka Gakkai Protesters and Supporters: Religious Motivations for Political Activism in Contemporary Japan." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 2015: 1-31.

Müller, Dominik M. "Post-Islamism or Pop-Islamism? Ethnographic observations of Muslim youth politics in Malaysia." *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, 2013: 261-284.

Noor, Farish A. *The Malaysian Islamic Party PAS 1951-2013: Islamism in a Mottled Nation.* Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2016.

Ong, Kian Ming. "Malaysia's 2023 State Elections (Part 1): Projections and Scenarios." *ISEAS Perspective* 2023, no. 52 (2023): 1-10.

Ong, Kian Ming. "Malaysia's 2023 State Elections (Part 2): Campaign Strategies and Future Implications." *ISEAS Perspectives* 2023, no. 66 (2023): 1-10.

Pihak Berkuasa Tempatan Negeri Kedah Darul Aman. 2024. https://pbt.kedah.gov.my/index.php/latar-belakang-mds/#:~:text=Jumlah%20penduduk%20di%20Daerah%20Sik,Mukim%20Teloi%20(13%2C175.27%20hektar). (accessed 01 19, 2024).

Putri, Yulita, and Nurhuda Abid. "Hasan Al-Banna's Thought Contribution to the Concept of Islamic Education." *International Journal of Contemporary Studies in Education*, 2023: 34-41.

Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia. 2024. http://sprinfo.spr.gov.my/spr/MAKLUMAT%20ASAS/STATISTIK%20PRU%20KE_15%

20UMUR%20BY_DUN.pdf (accessed 01 19, 2024).

Tayeb, Azmil. "Will Perikatan Nasional's Electoral Dominance in Kedah Persist in the Upcoming State Election?" *ISEAS Perspectives* 2023, no. 2 (2023): 1-12.

Weiss, Meredith L. "Duelling networks: relational clientelism in electoral-authoritarian Malaysia." *Democratization*, 2019: 1-19.