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Beyond Ethnicity: Federal relations and Non-Malay Muslim Bumiputera Support for UMNO in Sabah

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions causing non-Malay Muslim Bumiputera (NMMB) political support for UMNO within the context of federal politics in Sabah. The evolution of Malaysia's political dynamics saw the rise of regionalist and federalist sentiment in Sabah, in which Sabah stands as a unique political background where local and national politics intersect. UMNO retains substantial support in the state, although having the ethnic Malay as a minority in the state. Previous scholarship has commonly distinguished the political demographic in Sabah as Muslim and non-Muslim Bumiputera; however, such a dichotomy may cloud the NMMB's distinct political perceptions. Therefore, using a qualitative research design, this research investigated the federal aspect of NMMB support for UMNO rather than its religious dimension. Following ethics approval, 10 NMMB UMNO members were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol, who were recruited through snowball sampling, and the data were then analysed using thematic analysis. A main theme of Federal support, development, and concerns about marginalisation emerged, followed by four sub-themes: i) Perceived Integration into National Politics, ii) Perceived Development Benefits of Federal Alignment, iii) Concerns about Political Marginalisation, and iv) Perceived Access to Political Power. The finding suggests that NMMB support for UMNO has a federal outlook into their reasoning and influence. Hence, the study expands the literature of Sabah politics by demonstrating how NMMB perceptions of federal access intersect in their political reasoning. Future research should explore the nuances that exist within the NMMB communities to enrich Sabah-based literature on political engagement

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1. INTRODUCTION

The fragmented political landscape in Malaysia throughout the early and mid-2020s is argued to occur right after the political shift during the 14th general election in 2018. The collapse of Barisan Nasional as the dominant party in Malaysia in 2018 produced political vacuums that were filled by loose coalitions and cooperation, which makes the political landscape fragmented and evolving (Jaffar et al., 2026; Weiss & Suffian, 2023). One of the highlights of this development may appear in the way Sabah and Sarawak's political alignment and interaction with Peninsular Malaysia's national politics in forming the federal government.

Emerging as a potential "Borneo Bloc", Sabah and Sarawak hold considerable parliamentary seats that may affect the formation of the federal government (Chin, 2025), in which Sabah holds 25 seats while Sarawak holds 31, making a total of 56 seats that can be decisive for a simple majority to form the government at the federal level. This "Borneo bloc" may have originate from their earlier description as "fixed deposits" under Barisan Nasional political dominance (Puyok & Sukhani, 2020). Because of the bloc's potential significance in determining the federal government, they were reported as the prospective "kingmakers" in federal politics (Leong, 2022; Vanar, 2026).

Sabah presents itself as an intriguing backdrop for national, local, ethnic, and regionalist politics in Malaysia. With a population of 3.8 million, Sabah has a highly diverse demography, with an estimated 50 ethnic groups and more than 200 sub-ethnic groups (Puyok, 2025), in which Islam is practised by 69% of the population, followed by Christianity by 25% and Buddhists with 5% (Sintang, 2024). Building on this, Sabah Non-Malay Bumiputera—a broader category than NMMB— form the largest segment of the state's population (Somiah & Sto. Domingo, 2021), while Malays account for less than 9% (Rosley & Awang Jambol, 2023). Some estimates suggest that the proportion may be lower due to ambiguities in ethnic classification and identification (Amrullah et al., 2018), and controversies surrounding migration and identity documentation in Sabah (Chia, 2023). Although most of Sabah's population is not ethnically Malay, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a national party synonymous with ethnic Malay political representation in Peninsular Malaysia, established a significant electoral presence in the state (Suhaimi et al., 2026).

With the evolving nature of contemporary Malaysian politics, scholarship regarding Sabah politics has increasingly incorporated a federal angle into its interest (Abdullah et al., 2025; Chin, 2025; Puyok & Mohamad Naim, 2023). The support of NMMB for UMNO in Sabah is an interesting case, as ethnicity was seen as a powerful predictor of voting behaviour in Malaysia (Mustafa et al., 2026) and was also reported to be crucial yet fluid in Sabah politics (Puyok, 2025). Rather than relying on a primordialist approach to understand the issue, this research adopts a federal angle into its work, exploring with a central question: What are the perceptions of NMMB towards political support for UMNO within the context of federal politics in Sabah?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualising Non-Malay Muslim Bumiputera

Scholarship concerning Sabah politics has often distinguished the Bumiputera there through the religious dichotomy; Muslim and Non- Muslim (Chin, 2017; Chia, 2023; Puyok, 2025). This distinction

was reasoned through religious-based mobilisation. This is seen in Sabah through Muslim and Christian constituencies displaying support in relation to their religious affiliation (Chin, 2017, 2019; Puddin, 2024; Hajimin et al., 2020). Although being significant in simplifying the heterogeneous groups that are present in Sabah, it may potentially hide the richness and substantial ethnic and cultural differences within the NMMB. Sabah's diversity is also reflected in the multifaceted religious dimension that exists within distinct ethnic groups. For instance, although the Kadazandusun and Rungus communities are predominantly Christian, both similarly include Muslim minorities (Animbok, 2023; Mohd Khalli et al., 2025).

Even though there is a lack of a unified definition of who is considered a Bumiputera in Sabah (Salleh et al., 2021), this study relies on previous work by Somiah and Sto. Domingo (2021) and Perman (2024), in which the NMMB in Sabah are categorised as Bumiputera ethnic that professes Islam as their religion. This may include Bajau, Iranun, Suluk, Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, and Rungus—ethnic umbrella of the KDMR—, Sungai, and others that fit this description. This distinction is important because Bumiputera is a broader category than Malay. Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail (2003) clarifies that the term Bumiputera includes the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak, whereas the constitutional definition of Malay combines Islam, the Malay language, and Malay custom with a specific geographical relation to Peninsular Malaysia. NMMB should therefore not automatically be treated as ethnically Malay or just a simplified blanket term of Muslim Bumiputera within a heterogeneous state such as Sabah, merely because they share the Islamic faith. The category does not deny the significance of religious identity. Instead, it distinguishes and recognizes religious association from ethnic identification and enables the study to examine why NMMB groups support a national party historically associated with Malay political representation. This division provides a further precise basis for analysing the relations involving ethnic identity, party affiliation, and federal–state relations in Sabah.

2.2 Political support in Malaysia

Political support is an enduring concept that tries to identify how support is explained and seen. Easton (1975) sees it as an attitude that is based on a person's evaluations of an object, whether favourable or unfavourable, which may be reflected in their political action. Furthermore, Easton (1975) separated between two types of political support: specific and diffuse political support. Specific support refers to support that is formed by citizens' assessments relative to the performance of an incumbent political authority. While diffuse support could be conveyed through trust, legitimacy, loyalty, and attachment that endure even with dissatisfaction with policies or political outcomes. Indicated as being more enduring by Easton (1975), it exhibits a more positive attitude to what a political object signifies rather than simply how it acts at a certain time. Recent writings applying Easton's definition display the concept's continuous valuable application in contemporary political research (Menzner & Schweizer, 2026; van Ham & van Elsas, 2024). This research will apply the general meaning by Easton (1975) as a point of reference to understand the dynamics of NMMB support for UMNO in Sabah from a federal perspective.

Political support in Malaysia is seen through the complex layer that the country's heterogeneity possesses, which is reflected by ethnicity, political issues, socialisation, media exposure, party strategy, and institutional conditions. One relevant study is by Jou and Ooi (2022)—despite having a limited view on Sabah— where the study found differences among Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities in democratic attitudes, institutional trust, political participation, and national pride. Additionally, political support was explored through national and local issues, where they influenced voters' political positions, with locally

based concerns seen as being mainly important (Salehudin & Awang Besar, 2023). Azlan and Mohamed Noor (2024) displayed that political support is affected by the voter turnout, how the party competes, narrative in campaigns, socioeconomic interests, and the first-past-the-post system in marginal constituencies. Anuar and Latip (2026) found that family influence shaped political engagement among university students, and similarly, as observed by Perman (2024) among NMMB in Sabah. Government-regulated media broadcasting also were seen as playing an important role in political communication and managing Malaysia's plural society (Adhikarya et al., 1977/2025). Anwary (2023) highlighted the interrelation between public administration, legislation, and the justice system in executing policies by the government and holding institutional success for political support. Hence, political support is a broad concept that can be inspected through the many layers within the fabric of society in Malaysia, and in this research context, the layers within the NMMB through a federal lens.

2.3 Federalism in the Malaysian-Sabah context

We argue that one of the ways this study can be understood is through the lens of federalism, specifically Sabah's position within the Malaysian federation where federal-based research is increasingly emerging as relevant within this period of political milieu in Malaysia (Abdullah et al., 2025; Chin, 2025; Puyok & Mohamad Naim, 2023). Sabah became part of Malaysia through the Malaysia Agreement 1963 and retains constitutional, administrative, and political features that differentiate it from the states of Peninsular Malaysia (Chin, 2019; Abdullah et al., 2025). This structure, in concert with the dynamics of political engagement in Malaysian politics, gives national parties a way into Sabah's local political landscape and links political competition at the local and federal levels (Chin, 2019, 2025; Mustafa et al., 2026).

When authority is divided between a central government and regional or subnational units, this is referred to as federalism, which allows both levels to exercise powers within their respective jurisdictions (Benz & Broschek, 2013). Federalism has been Malaysia's governmental founding principle since its inception (Raja Nur Alaini Bt Raja Omar, 2012). This structure allows the states to employ semi-autonomous powers while sustaining a connection with the federal government (Raja Nur Alaini Bt Raja Omar, 2012). Ross-Larson (1976) provides an early account of Sabah politics from the perspective of Syed Kechik's political involvement, showing how federal interference, local political leadership, and ethnic divisions moulded power relations during Sabah's early post-Malaysia period. Federalism has also drawn criticism. Some scholars argue that Malaysian federalism is highly centralised at the federal level, creating an uneven federal–state relationship —despite having intentional asymmetries in the federation— in which the central government can overpower the states (Mohammad Azziyadi Ismail & Mohammad Agus Yusoff, 2022; Ostwald, 2017). Studies of federalism in Malaysia have also evaluated how religion became central to the political struggles of many Malay-Muslim political parties (Ationg, 2018; Puyok & Mohamad Naim, 2023).

Through federalism, Malaysia's political clash involves similar and dissimilar political parties at the national (federal) and local (state) levels. Party rivalry in Sabah has involved a continual tension between locally based parties and parties from national level (Chin, 2025; Ostwald & Oliver, 2020; Puyok, 2025). Local parties generally present themselves as more genuine advocates of Sabah's interests, autonomy, and identity, specifically through claims regarding the Malaysia Agreement 1963, ethnic-based sentiments, rights, and perceived representation, among others (Chin, 2025; Puyok, 2025). National parties,

conversely, may offer greater institutional linking to federal governing arrangements involving access and resources, which may be important for development (Chin, 2025; Ostwald & Oliver, 2020). Sabah has undergone two contrasting relations with the federal government: one in which the state government was allied with the federal government, and another in which it was in opposition and at odds.

In this situation, Sabah appeared to experience unfavoured effects in development when its government were opposed to the federal government (Raja Nur Alaini Bt Raja Omar, 2012; Dollah et al., 2019). Mohammad Agus Yusoff (2006) contends that Malaysian federalism function less as a cooperation between the centre and the states and more likely as a system of central domination. UMNO's growth into Sabah demonstrates how access to federal power can develop a significant basis for political appeal even among NMMB communities that do not share the party's principal ethnic identity (Chin, 2019; Puyok, 2025; Suhaimi et al., 2026). This aspect in understanding the federal tie and connection is an integral section in looking for federal and NMMB dynamics in lieu of how it may affect their political support towards local or national political parties. Similarly, Puyok and Bagang (2011) establish that development politics intersects with the indigenous perception of leadership as well as ethnic identity, where it was seen that legitimacy depends not only on ethnic representation but also on the leaders' capacity to direct development towards their people. Despite the establishment of asymmetry in the federation of Malaysia, in which Sabah and Sarawak enjoyed more rights as compared to the other states in peninsular Malaysia, the various scholarship on Sabah and Malaysia federalism points to an interesting intersection between federal power, development, and the capacity to provide support by aligning themselves with the central powers.

3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was selected to explore how NMMB UMNO members understood the role of federal political connections in shaping their political support for UMNO in Sabah. A qualitative method was chosen, as it was deemed to allow for a deeper view and depth into the nuances of understanding a social phenomenon (Lim, 2025). Furthermore, Grossman et al. (2026) assert that qualitative research enables a richer understanding of the processes being studied. Therefore, rather than measuring support through survey variables, the study explored how informants explained their own support for UMNO in the context of federal political connection as an aspect of deeper and richer context.

The inclusion criteria required participants to be UMNO members, Malaysians aged above 18 years old, and including NMMB such as Bajau, Suluk, and KDMR. This classification was adopted with a similar composition from research by Perman (2024) and Somiah and Sto. Domingo (2021). The exclusion criteria for this research included those who were non-UMNO members, non-Malaysian, 17 years old or below, ethnic Malays, and inclusive of ethnic groups usually related with Malay identity ethnics such as Brunei-Malays and Bugis (Somiah & Sto. Domingo, 2021) in Sabah to remove potential ethnic bias that may attract them to UMNO.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 informants using an interview protocol developed from the research questions. Snowball sampling was used to recruit the informants to participate in this research. Naderifar et al. (2017) explained that snowball sampling involves existing participants suggesting other appropriate individuals, with recruitment often continuing until data saturation is achieved. The interviews questions revolve around their personal details, their detail and experiences

being a member of UMNO, their reason to provide support for UMNO as NMMB, as well as questions regarding federal perception into their reason to support UMNO in Sabah.

An earlier sample of 12 informants was targeted for the research, as suggested as previous research suggests that data saturation may be achieved after approximately 12 interviews if the study centres on common experiences (Guest et al., 2006, as cited in Kerr et al., 2010). However, the data became saturated by the ninth informant and confirmed by the tenth informant. This concept of saturation is consistent with qualitative research for its ability to capture information rather than focusing on quantity, which is supported by Kerr et al. (2010), where data saturation indicates that sufficient qualitative data have been collected to support a comprehensive analysis. The transcribed interviews that were done face-to-face were then analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Ethics approval was obtained before data collection. One researcher conducted the initial coding. The remaining members of the research team meanwhile were the ones conducting the review of the transcripts, codes, and proposed themes, discussed interpretations, and finally verified the final thematic structure.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was incorporated into the research design. The primary data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were systematically cross-referenced with secondary sources, such as journal articles, research papers, books, theses, and newspaper articles that discuss the federal-state political dynamics in Sabah. By corroborating the informants' perspectives with available literature, it allows a more robust interpretation and mitigates the risk of self-reported bias (Carter et al., 2014).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organised into one main theme, followed by four sub-themes. In this regard, they are presented together to reflect its qualitative nature, where qualitative researchers may combine the findings and discussion sections when findings and their interpreted meanings are difficult to separate (Levitt et al., 2018, p. 29).

Table 1. Informant's Demographic details

Particular	Category	Count
Gender	Male	7
	Female	3
Ethnicity	Bajau	5
	Dusun/KDMR	3
	Suluk	1
	Sino-Dusun	1
Age group	20–29 years	2
	30–49 years	6
	50 years and above	2
Geographical area	West Coast of Sabah	6

Particular	Category	Count
	East Coast of Sabah	4
UMNO membership duration	5–10 years	4
	15–20 years	2
	20–29 years	4

The demographic background of the 10 NMMB informants comprised five Bajau informants, three KDMR, one ethnic Suluk, and one ethnic Sino-Dusun, as explained in the literature, Sino-Dusun can be Muslim, as non- Muslim dominant ethnic can have Islam as a religion within the ethnic, thus is accepted with the parameters of this research. All informants identify themselves as being Muslim. Their ages ranged from 24 to 55 years. Two informants were in their twenties, while six were aged 30–49, while two were aged 50 or older. Six of the informants were from the west coast of Sabah, while four were from the east coast.

4.1 Main theme: Federal support, development, and concerns about marginalisation

The study was able to concentrate on the federal aspect by examining the informant's political support for UMNO in Sabah, in which a robust theme regarding access to federal support, development, and concerns about marginalisation emerged. This theme was seen as the focal point for the informants, signalling the intensity and perceived federal politics in reasoning their political support for UMNO in Sabah despite being NMMB. The presence of a powerful federal government dominated their perception of UMNO as connected directly to the federal government. Decades of power consolidation by UMNO through Barisan Nasional at the federal and local levels —before it declines — cemented its legacy and narrative into the informant's perception of UMNO and the federal government. This perception that UMNO would be able to provide a platform for federal access was developed through years of living under UMNO rule, both at the local level and nationally. The power that UMNO was able to showcase during its prime left a strong imprint on the informant's perception of UMNO and the federal government. This theme is further explored through four sub-themes, each highlighting the nuances that exist within the reasons for NMMB support for UMNO in Sabah.

4.2.1 Sub-theme one: Perceived Integration into National Politics

Despite UMNO's struggle in the post-2018 general election, the informants reported that within the context of federal politics, the grassroots remained loyal to UMNO due to the past record that UMNO has shown previously, which was deemed to be unable to be replicated by other local parties as well as other national parties. Despite many UMNO members in Sabah changing alliances due to the political fluctuations at the national and local level, those who stayed with UMNO were adamant that none of the political parties provided the same leverage at the federal level as UMNO. There exists a strong understanding by the informants in having a relationship with the federal government, in the sense that it is suggested to be reciprocal in nature. The sub-theme may aid to explain the NMMB support through the context of Malaysia's uneven population distribution wherewith approximately 80% of the population residing in Peninsular Malaysia, NMMB supporters may appear to channel their political support through UMNO as a likely approach in positioning themselves beside the country's demographic and political

majority. The following interview excerpts illustrate how participants associated UMNO with federal access.

> “Yes, UMNO is a platform for anyone to go to the national level."
>
> (Informant A1)

> "UMNO in Sabah is seen as still being significant, not only at the local and state level but at the federal and national level."
>
> (Informant A7)

This orientation, done by the NMMB with the majority through UMNO, may appear as a deliberate plan under their political approach, in which smaller groups within the population seek to maintain their interests and strengthen their political representation (Ufen, 2020).

4.2.2 Sub-theme two: Perceived Development Benefits of Federal Alignment

Within this access to federal institution, the benefit that appears as beneficial to the informants in providing their support is in the way the federal government can provide aids, development resources, and any perceived assistance to them. This can be seen in the early 1990s in Sabah, where Sabah was given more resources after UMNO reigned in Sabah (Aziz & Said, 2017). This demonstrates that UMNO was able to channel financial and development support to Sabah when it was both the political body within Sabah and the federal government. The informant’s perception of providing political support to UMNO in Sabah can be seen in the way the federal system and its interaction in the past. Malaysia’s federal system has nevertheless been criticised for the concentration of authority and resources at the federal level, which may produce an unequal relationship between the federal and state governments (Mohammad Azziyadi Ismail & Mohammad Agus Yusoff, 2022; Ostwald, 2017). This matches with the informant's view of their relationship and what they perceive UMNO can provide for them, despite not being Malay. The following interview excerpts support this discussion.

> “UMNO is quicker because they connect directly with the federal level and are able to provide assistance faster.”
>
> (Informant A10)

> "There is no other national party as strong as UMNO in Sabah…UMNO is a party that also uplifts the people of Sabah."
>
> (Informant A3)

This aspect of developmental politics is similarly supported by Loh (1996), in which growth-oriented narratives were used in order to maintain legitimacy in Sabah. Thus, the NMMB's potential reason to provide support for UMNO is believed to be based on the benefits that they will reap by supporting UMNO through reciprocal development and aid in Sabah.

4.2.3 Sub-theme three: Concerns about Political Marginalisation

Furthermore, this access appears to ensure that NMMB not only gain federal access but also the ability to advance their own interests and rights. In this context, it is believed that if they do not align themselves with the federal power, they will lose the chance to be seen as politically valid and, to a greater extent, their ability to be politically involved at the national level will be reduced, which is concerning as they are a minority in Malaysia. Sabah's political history consists of periods of Sabah's alignment with the federal government as well as periods of opposition, with some studies suggesting that strained federal–state relations affected the state's access to development and political influence (Raja Nur Alaini Bt Raja Omar, 2012; Dollah et al., 2019). This may lead to political retaliation from the federal level if Sabah did not provide support for the federal government; therefore, the existence of UMNO in Sabah as a political party facilitated the mediation between Sabah and the federal government. The NMMB in Sabah are fragmented into several factions, and the small number in their population make it hard for them to gain significant political power, as compared to the ethnic Malays from West Malaysia, where UMNO easily provides them with the political platform to be seriously given attention. UMNO provided the right platform for the divided NMMB in Sabah, and it was an instant success. The following interview excerpts support this discussion.

> "So, for me, in Sabah, we cannot be separated from the federal government…we need to cooperate as well, so if we want to fight for our rights in Sabah, we must unite under one party to address the misuse of power by those in Peninsular Malaysia."
>
> (Informant A2)

> "I see UMNO as a large party that is capable of providing leadership at the national level, compared to local parties that only focus on the state government... Sabah needs more leadership at the national level to ensure that Sabah's voices and needs are heard in Malaysia's cabinet system."
>
> (Informant A5)

One interesting finding in this sub-theme is the inclusion of a concern on over-reliance on the federal government's ability to develop. Although the informants noted that the relation to the federal government is too strong, which makes them less independent, this is seen after decades of being a part of the national and local government. In addition to that, members also noticed a perceived adverse effect on the ability of the state of Sabah to self-govern, as it appears to be too reliant on the federal government for assistance. This reflects the apprehension that they have despite maintaining a strong federal connection, which makes them vulnerable because of their dependence. Thus, the ethnic factor is important in Sabah, but as the findings show, ethnic loyalties remain fluid as reported by Puyok (2025). This reflects an evolving relationship between local NMMB as well as their role within the federation that corresponds to the realisation that Sabah might play the "kingmaker" role in the new Malaysian politics (Leong, 2022; Vanar, 2026). Puyok and Bagang (2011) establish that development politics has been used to gain political mileage in Sabah, thus corresponding with what is perceived by the NMMB while being a member of UMNO in Sabah. The following interview excerpts support this discussion.

"The relation at the federal level is so strong that they cannot be independent."

(Informant A6)

Several factors may contribute to Sabah's reliance on the federal government. Firstly, despite the guarantee of a special position under the Constitution, Malaysia operates on a highly centralised system which highlights federal dominance (Ang & Whiting, 2013). Secondly, increasingly centralised fiscal and political power, it significantly reduces the autonomy of states like Sabah, despite their control over matters such as land and natural resources (Jomo & Hui, 2003). Additionally, as regards political dynamics, Sabah is seen as a key player that contributed to UMNO-Barisan Nasional's dominance. During the 2013 election, despite the coalition losing the popular vote, the number of seats they won in Sabah enabled them to form the federal government (Osman, 2017). Therefore, while there have been calls for greater autonomy, these efforts have been constrained by federal dominance and internal political divisions within Sabah (Lai, 2022).

4.2.4 Sub-theme four: Perceived Access to Political Power

Overall, the informants were adamant that UMNO would be the political party that could represent them to gain access to political power. The perceived access is suggested to be shaped when UMNO was able to stand out at the local and national level, especially when the people whom they voted and supported for was represented the leadership, at both levels. The findings seem to indicate that UMNO provided NMMB with political access that other parties do not possess, apperception that may be attributed to a successful political legacy that has seen many successes under UMNO throughout the decades. The party's proposed entry into the state was regarded as a means of securing the political position of indigenous Muslims, while its expansion was presented as strengthening political integration between Sabah and Peninsular Malaysia (Aziz & Said, 2017).

Therefore, the accessibility in gaining political power appears to be only natural to them under UMNO. Thus, UMNO appears to have provided the right political platform for NMMB to participate in. The informants appear to associate UMNO's nationwide organisational structure with its capability to function successfully in both Sabah and Malaysia. They may have regarded this broad party link as strengthening UMNO's identity and legacy as a national political organisation, in contrast with local parties whose impact was perceived to be confined to the state level. This perception was reinforced by the significance of Sabah's Barisan Nasional representatives going to the federal government and their access to by having positions within the national level political institutions (Chin, 2015; Puyok & Sukhani, 2020). For these informants, national recognition and an established organisational presence enhanced UMNO's credibility and reinforced their disposition to continue supporting the party. The following interview excerpts support this discussion.

> "UMNO allows for leaders from Sabah to be ministers at the federal level, bringing interest to Sabah."
>
> (Informant A3)

> "Other political parties do not seem to be as strong at the national level. UMNO has all the needed recipe for a successful party."
>
> (Informant A7)

> "UMNO in Sabah can ensure Sabah's rights at the federal level as a national party."
>
> (Informant A4)

This sub-theme reflects the need for NMMB informants' interest in being a part of something bigger and, in this context, the ability to garner political power, which UMNO was able to provide for them. As compared to other political parties, only UMNO was seen by the informants to have a good track record of governance, leadership, and political success. Sabah's fragmentised political parties project an image of instability to the informants, and this affects the way they value their support towards UMNO, despite not being Malay. Following its entry into Sabah after the dissolution of USNO, UMNO steadfastly strengthened its position by abolishing the rotational chief minister's system. Long-serving chief ministers who aligned their positions with the federal "rules of the game" and maintained close relations with federal leaders made UMNO the face of stability (Hazis, 2018). Thereby, from 1999 to 2018, UMNO was perceived as the hegemonic party in Sabah, which reinforced the idea that it is the face of stability in Sabah mainly because it embodied a federal-backed dominant-party order that delivered continuity for nearly three decades (Chin, 2018).

The themes and sub-themes also reflected how Easton (1975) sees political support, where elements of specific and diffuse political support from the central idea. Specific support refers to support that is formed by citizens' assessments comparative to the feat of an incumbent political authority, which is seen through the informant's perception of UMNO in Sabah in providing development and support. While diffuse support could be conveyed through trust, legitimacy, loyalty, and attachment that endure even with dissatisfaction with policies or political outcomes, and this is indicated through the research where the informant's perception that UMNO is still desirable despite hesitation of being too dependent on the federal government. Hence, reflecting a conscious understanding of what they are supporting and the concern that may co-exist between benefit through federal access and NMMB being reliant to federal powers.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined how active non-Malay Muslim Bumiputera (NMMB) UMNO members in Sabah perceived the role of federal political connections in sustaining their support for the party. One main

theme was followed by four sub-themes that emerged under this study, with its initial objective was to explore the perception of non-Malay Muslim Bumiputera (NMMB) political support for UMNO within the context of federal politics in Sabah. It has managed to look into the relationship between federal and local sentiments that are presented by supporting UMNO, despite not being Malay.

The research findings expand the literature of grassroots politics in Sabah by covering the simplified dimension of Muslim and non-Muslim Bumiputera politics in Sabah, offering richer data and analysis from the local level through using the lens of the NMMB. This has provided the ability to showcase the diversity that exists in Sabah that sometimes may be covered by a simplified dichotomy in demography. Even though the study started the argument that NMMB support for UMNO requires a federal lens to understand their motives, the findings presented layers of perception that are shared by hope and marginalisation by Sabahans in the wider federal system, in which they negotiated their identity to ensure that they remain relevant in the ever-changing political world.

Policymakers can use the research findings in improving support and development to the community in Sabah effectively. This is to ensure that issues regarding marginalisation to be lowered and handled accordingly. This can also be good indicators to identify what development aspect is affecting their federal reliance and build on improving the condition of the people of Sabah, thus enhancing good governance through the research findings. This intervention can be made through ministries and federal agencies, where specific targeted actions can be done especially on aspect of infrastructure, education, health, communication and economy.

Overall, the sustained support of the interviewed NMMB members was linked with their perception that UMNO could provide them with federal access to institutions, resources, and meaning and connect Sabah's local political interests with national-level institutions as Malaysians. One of the research limitations is the inability to generalise the findings based on the interviews, as they cannot be the representation to all whom support UMNO in Sabah or Malaysia, since the parameters are clearly set within Sabah and amongst NMMB, a future survey could be developed to expand the research. All 10 participants were active UMNO members recruited through snowball sampling, which likely favours positive accounts.

Thus, future research should investigate this research limitations and the overall federal interplay in Sabah and local political dynamics involving local and national parties. The post-2018 and 2022 general elections, along with the recent state elections, saw UMNO's dominance broken. The rise of localised political movements such as Warisan and, subsequently, GRS demonstrates that Sabah is no longer UMNO's "fixed deposit". This shift challenges traditional notions of political hegemony in the state, and this warrants further research.

6. RESEARCHERS' POSTIONALITY

All researchers involved are based in Sabah and two of the researchers are from the NMMB ethnic group in Sabah, while the remaining two are ethnic Malays from West Malaysia who are posted in Sabah. This positionality may affect the way the data are being read and understood, however the diversity of the research group represented by unique experience and background is part of the way to manage that risk. The researchers are interested in understanding politics in Sabah as well as the how Sabah's politics are connected to the wider Malaysian political landscape

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8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interests is associated to this publication

9. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Azwan Ahzran Perman served as the principal researcher and led the conceptualisation, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, and preparation of the original manuscript. **Nurfaizah Abbdullah** reviewed the manuscript's structure and logical flow, checked the presentation and consistency of the data, and contributed to the revision of the article. **Muhammad Izwan Ikhsan** and **Ku Mohd Amir Aizat Ku Yusof** contributed to data validation by verifying the accuracy, consistency, and reliability of the data and supporting evidence used in the article. All authors reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

10. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

Paper was written by human authors with ChatGPT usage focused on grammar to ensure language clarity.

11. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

12. ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval obtained, reference no: JKEUPM-2023-114

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