

Exploring Family Influence on Political Support Amongst Non-Malay Bumiputera in Sabah

Azwan Ahzran bin Perman^{1,2}

¹ Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sabah Branch, Kota Kinabalu Campus

² Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Corresponding Author: azwanlokub@gmail.com

Abstract

Political support is an integral component within the survival of a political party, it determines the strength and vitality of its political progress. The nature of politics can penetrate the layers of society and touch the fabric of a family. The political landscape in the state of Sabah is colored with a myriad of local and national base parties, and it has affected the way politics and democracy are practiced. The non-Malay Bumiputera constitutes a significant portion of the state demographic, however the continued political support towards a non-local political party is widely seen in the state, and this is an interesting avenue to be explored. Therefore, using a qualitative method and analyzing the interviews using thematic analysis, this research has explored non-Malay Bumiputera on their family influence in their political support towards non-local political parties. The research through two main themes found out that family influence on their political support had a significant impact on their political support. This research has managed to highlight the intricacy of familial values and how they impact the political participation of an individual, expanding on the dynamic of non-Malay Bumiputera political support in Sabah. Future research should explore other aspects of political support in the state that underscore the state's political dynamic involving ideology, religion, party management, ethnicity, gender, and localities.

Keywords: Political support, Family influence, Non-Malay Bumiputera, Sabah politics, Malaysia Politics

INTRODUCTION

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Political support is the very basis for political parties to be able to function and operate, without it, the political party will fail to secure its objectives and targets. Political support allows political parties to mobilize their will and interests. Within the context of Sabah, the non-Malay Bumiputera holds most of the demographics, through the different ethnic that fall under the Bumiputera status, it makes a very diverse set of population. Through the years, political dynamics in Sabah have evolved on their own naturally with the development of local-based political parties, and the addition of non-local ones mostly imported from west Malaysia. These non-local parties may amongst a few include the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), People's Justice Party (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Malaysian Islamic Party

(PAS), and many others. This has led to a diverse political setting that includes changing political ties and collation throughout the decades.

The non-Malay Bumiputera in Sabah constitute the largest set of population in the state, this group of Bumiputera is represented by many ethnic and crosses between religious lines. As compared to the Malays in the country, they are officially seen as practicing Islam as their faith, however, the non-Malay Bumiputera can be divided between the Muslim and non-Muslim Bumiputera, and this is widely apparent in the Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah. Past research does not address the personal political support exploration for political parties in Sabah. They also did not analyse members' participation from a grassroots member perspective. By having this lack of knowledge in the literature of political support to political parties namely in Sabah this is something that is lacking in exploration on the member's side. At times, the support of non-Malay Bumiputera to political parties outside of their state of ethnicity or even religion is seen and recorded, and this is an interesting avenue to be explored.

However, developing on non-Malay Bumiputera support for political parties in Sabah, pieces of literature on the exploration of family influence for political support in Sabah seems to be lacking, as many studies looking into politics and political parties in Malaysia focus on the culture (Ismail, 2011; Mahadee Ismail et al., 2018; Md Yunus et al., 2020; Mohd Zain, 2021; Ramli et al., 2021), history (Chin, 2015; Omar Din et al., 2017; Stockwell, 1977), political parties issues challenges (Brahim et al., 2013; Shamsul, 1988), youth political participation (Ahmad & Zain, 2021; Mohd Hed, 2017) and conceptual aspect (Hutchinson, 2015; Liow, 2004). Similarly, studies of political parties in Sabah focus on the historical aspect (Aziz & Said, 2018; Chin, 1999, 2015; Chin & Puyok, 2010), culture (Ismail, 2011), and ethnic politics (Ationg, 2018; Bagang et al., 2021; Dollah et al., 2018). The support of political parties has many influences, and at times been explored through many lenses, therefore this research then is set to explore the gap that is lacking through the family influence in political participation amongst non-Malay Bumiputera in Sabah.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political parties require members and supporters to be fully active, in most of the western world, political party membership has been plummeting due to the changes of values that the society have, and this can also be seen in Malaysia as well (Mohd Hed & Grasso, 2020). Nevertheless, membership of political parties is an important component to mobilize and operate the party.

Party membership is an underexplored area (Haute, 2011), however other findings regarding part membership are explored in another related research. A person can be motivated to join a party based on their principles and ideologies (Poletti et al., 2019), this indicates that political party that has a strong and appealing ideological front will convey similarity and attractiveness to their supporters thus allowing them to be inclined to give support and membership, policies is also another reason to provide support later membership (Poletti et al., 2019), this is because political parties are an apparatus for modern democracy and later the formation of governments that would determine and create policies, and these polices may be seen as an attractive point for people to give their support and members especially if those policies is something that favours them or towards a preferred condition. A person can also be a member based on their pure motivation to support, identify, beliefs or class (Gauja, 2015; Wan Rohila Ganti & Ahmad Fauzi, 2020), in which a person can identify with a political party that represent their identity or even beliefs that includes religion and class as seen in the labour based political parties. Where in essence all of the things mentioned are a part of the functions of a political party (Heywood, 2013).

Another aspect that could attract a person to give support and membership to the party is in terms of the organization and internal aspect of the party. Political leaders are an integral part of political parties, where they are the representatives as well as the of emblem for the party (Awang Besar, 2018). Throughout histories, political parties are painted by many leaders that has become synonymous with the party. Leaders are seen as a reason why people join political parties and that they have trust to leader that is heading the party (Poletti et al., 2019; Whiteley et al., 2019), this indicates that trust towards of a leaders gives considerable impact to their stakeholders, and the strength of those leaders to carry themselves is an important factor for support and membership. Trust appears to suggest as a considered good indicator of their political career (Hetherington, 1998), therefore leaders that have better trust perception tends to be better in the careers. Party members would prefer their own leaders than outside party leaders in giving and providing policies, even that policy is the same (Cole et al., 2023), this indicates that internal bias may affect their own leaders than those outside of the party, It is noted that party members will rate themselves better as compared to rival political parties (Clifford, 2020), this suggest that member parties see themselves as better than other political parties, making them in favor of their own organization as well as their polices and leaders.

Political Support has been seen as a gauge for democracy in many countries, where it will determine the outcome of an election and the overall stability of the country's politics and its effects towards their economy as well as other stakeholders that are under their consideration, this was seen on post-communist regimes and how the voters align their political support on the basis of economical reason (Mishler & Rose, 2002).

Easton (1975) has included in his definition of 'political support' as "the extent to which individuals evaluate political objects positively, that is, the mix of attitudes about political leaders, institutions and the system as a whole". Studies regarding political support have been done to see face mask compliance during the pandemic in the US (Howard, 2022), quality of governance (Zhai, 2022), migration effect on political support (Canavan & Turkoglu, 2022), online political support (Brandenberger et al., 2022) and government performance (Finkel, 1987). This definition has been used as a point of reference for their study as seen in Newton (2006) and Chen Jie (2004).

In the case of Malaysia, political support has been seen in numerous research, for instance, a study of youth political support shows that they are much more active in their political stance and seen as rebels during the elections altering election outcomes in Malaysia (Saleh et al., 2020)), research regarding youth is a popular study to gauge the political support that they have (Mohd Fuad et al., 2009). Meanwhile, other research looking into the youth aspect of political support in Malaysia has managed to explore their involvement and politics through online media, which they are much exposed to (Salman & Salleh, 2020). Researchers linking political support and social media (Salman & Salleh, 2020) also observed as a factor in providing political support in Malaysia.

A political party is defined as "an organized and presumably durable association, either of individuals or of distinguishable groups of individuals, which endeavors to place its members in governmental offices for the purpose of bringing about the adoption of favored political policies or programmed" (Marume et al., 2016). Whereas in Malaysia it has been explored in the ethnic (Ghazali et al., 2011), religious (Omar Din et al., 2017) context as well as election (Syed Annuar & Perman, 2023) and reason for participation (Zulkipli et al., 2020). In Malaysian political literature, Sabah holds a unique position compared to other states due to its local political developments and diverse geographical, ethnic, and religious background. The presence of Sabah and its active involvement in Malaysian politics has its own historical context. Starting from the formation of Malaysia, Sabah's political dynamics evolved with the passage of time. The political changes in Sabah discussed in this study cover the period from the mid-20th century when the

formation of the Malaysian federation began. From the early 1960s to the early 1990s, local political power in Sabah was dominated by indigenous political parties. Statistics show that during the 11th general election in Sabah, BN won 24 out of 25 parliamentary seats, and a similar trend continued in the 12th general election, highlighting BN and UMNO's dominance in Sabah during that period. UMNO and BN's involvement in Sabah during this time demonstrated strong political support from the Sabah community, with limited opposition from local or non-local parties. This political strength led to Sabah being labeled as the "fixed deposit" for BN, as political changes in other states had minimal impact on BN in Sabah during that time, a trend that continued into the 13th general election (Asmady & Suzalie, 2014).

However recent elections in the state especially the 2018 and 2020 elections show that BN is facing trouble in clenching their influence in the state (Chin & Puyok, 2010; Firdaus Azil, 2018; Ruzaini Zulkepli, 2021). Sabah politics is an ongoing movement that sees the wars from local parties, heavy west Malaysian parties, and its splinter groups. Through the formation of coalitions and defection by party members (Izwan, 2022), it has allowed for Sabah's politics under UMNO's lens to be rather colorful through the decades.

Family is in essence in a social context of our society; in this context, we can argue that family is an important cornerstone that influences an individual. Starting from birth, they are exposed to the family's environment and culture, and this could also be seen in terms of politics, there has been various research showing family having influences over the young (Weiss, 2020), one research indicates that young people that have parents who are party members are more likely to join political parties (Cross & Young, 2008). Similarly, a study in Malaysia suggests how the family factor becomes and influences youth participation in politics and how family becomes a setting of political discourse (Mohamad Razali et al., 2016; Zulkifli et al., 2021), this indicates that in Malaysia, family has a strong effect in the way politics is introduced in a person, this is further strengthen as this was also seen on a recent study in Malaysia too, hence supporting the claim that family is a big influence in youth participation in politics (Hadi Samsi et al., 2023). Family context is suggested to be able to transmit their political beliefs if it is done consistently during the children's childhood (Jennings et al., 2009).

Ethnic politics is seen in previous research in exploring political support amongst the citizen of Malaysia, where ethnic plays an important role during elections, non-Malays were more likely to support PR in 2015 than the Malays (Awang Besar et al.,

2015). Echoing this a study made on Chinese voters shows a similar pattern where they prefer those that can represent their ethnic (Mohd Fitri, 2016; Syed Annuar & Perman, 2023), this was also seen in Sabah where ethnic plays a crucial role in determining political support, as in the case of the Kadazandusun in Sabah (Johon & Puyok, 2022) and the federal government relations within a diverse ethnic context (Ahmad Tajudin et al., 2021).

These parties make up a strong political magnet for people who align themselves with that race and ethnic. As evident in Malaysia through representations of UMNO, MC and MIC among others (Awang Besar et al., 2015; James Chin, 2018) . Ensuring political support to the party. At times in Malaysia, since the ethnic Malays are constitutionally Muslim, will attach ethnic connotation into the ties of religion, and the representation of an ethnic Muslim Malay has been seen as a significant political element in the last few elections.

This set of literature reviews shows that despite the studies made on family influence and political support, there seems to be a missing part in the non-Malay Bumiputera in Sabah, therefore this gap is a crucial aspect to be filled for it can provide a different dimension in understanding political support in the context of Sabah and Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative phenomenological research design was selected for this study. The phenomenological function is to light up the specific context of a research and to become aware of phenomena by how they're perceived through the actors in a situation (Tracy, 2012; Yin, 2018). In the human sphere, this normally interprets into gathering 'deeper' facts and perceptions via inductive, qualitative methods which include interviews, discussions, and player observation, and representing it from the angle of the study's respondents (Creswell, 2014).

The data form for this research is in the form of qualitative where interviews would sit well with an inductive-based research strategy, and they would be able to be explored in line with a phenomenological approach. Within this research, the samples are obtained through snowballing and purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria of this research include any Bumiputera Sabah ethnic that is a native (Anak negeri), not Malay, Muslim, and of any gender above the age of 18 and is an active member of a political party in

Sabah regardless of their parties. Saturation of the data is the highlight of the qualitative research allowing for a better represented finding. This research targeted 15 informants but reached saturation at the 10 informants which is still considered a good sample for a qualitative study (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Following ethical approval, the study interview protocol was acknowledged and confirmed to be given to the informants.

The in-depth interview transcribed has been analysed using thematic analysis. The in-depth interviews were transcribed and interpreted using Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is a research method for the subjective analysis and interpretation of the content of text data using the process of coding and detecting as well as identifying patterns or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). This is suitable for this qualitative research in exploring family influence on political support for non-Malay Bumiputera in Sabah.

FINDINGS

The finding is developed into two themes, the first one is family exposure, followed by family support. The first part of the finding starts with details of the informants, the 10 non-Malay Bumiputera, one of them is from the Suluk ethnic, another one is from the Sino-Dusun, three of them are of Dusun ethnicities, while 5 of them are from the Bajau ethnic. The age of the informants was varied, with the youngest one being 24 years old and the eldest one 55 years old. Two of the respondents are above 50 years old, 10 are above 30 years old, and two of them are in their 20s.

Theme one: Family Exposure

The research has shown that the informants' generational exposure to political parties at an early age has set up their mindset on what political party they see they should belong to and at the same time a party that they can identify with. Having parents or relatives who are active members of the party, has given them a sense of what the party is about and what types of thinking, culture as well as ideas are appropriate with the party. This in essence has affected the way they view the political world surrounded by active political members in their family or even their childhood.

Through the medium of their family, they are exposed to party meetings and are not an alien to them. They are often exposed to party discussions as well as the inner workings of the party. Most of the younger informants grew up with political membership in their family when the political party was dominant in Sabah and Malaysia, that strong

impression during their childhood left quite an impact on them, that eventually being a political party member is considered as natural as it can be. In Some sense, it has become something that is expected of them to be one. When expressing about family influence on participation these selected quotes from the informants support it.

“Starting from my grandfather, then later to my father and later to my cousin and to me, we are all a strong proponent of the party”.

(Informant A1)

“It is family because the exposure is big to the political party”.

(Informant A4)

“My family since I was a child was involved with politics and political parties”.

(Informant A5)

“Majority of my family members are political party members”.

(Informant A6)

“Family factor to support my political party is still very important”.

(Informant A3)

“My father almost got selected to represent the party during an election”.

(Informant A2)

“My late father was also a member of the party”.

(Informant A9)

These statements support that exposure through their family has shaped their political perspectives and thus affects their support for political parties in Sabah. Family exposure to politics is paramount in the early introduction to the political world and is considered a great aspect to be considered into the informant’s reason for political support towards their political party in Sabah.

Theme two: Family support

Another aspect within the family sub-theme is in terms of family support. This support refers to the social system that encourages and enables them to be exposed but most importantly to be influential in their decision to be with a political party. This support system can be seen as having parents or relatives who are members or even having positions within the party to encourage them to be a part of the party and join in

the party's position as a political medium for the people. The following are excerpts from the interview to support the sub-theme.

"I was personally interested in joining the party, but my family supported it along the way".
(Informant A10)

"My family are all party members, but I joined in because of my principle".
(Informant A6)

"My family has always supported my participation and something that is anticipated from me".
(Informant A1)

When a political party involves the family, the informants would sense as if they were betraying their family when they give support to other political parties, and at times this can make them feel shameful for their acts and will later reside within a political party that aligns with the family. The support that the family provides to be a party member gives it a clear guideline for them into the political world, thus affirming their membership with their political party. This support that usually is given by the family forms a comfortable political net and backbone.

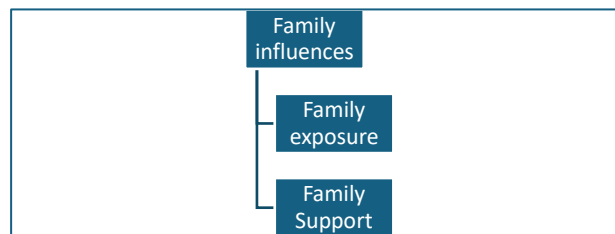


Figure 1: Thematic findings themes.

DISCUSSIONS

Most of the informants have shown that they were exposed to politics through their families. This is in line with most of the informants sharing what were their influences when they started politics. A family is where the informants were raised, where they were taught the right and wrong of the world, and through the family lenses also affected their political inclination. This inclination then would make them more susceptible to being in favour of the political leanings of their family, thus making their way into their political participation later in life following the political conditioning that they went through. The familial factor also contributes to the ability of the informants to

have a grasp on the political world, where they are much more aware of political issues locally and nationally. This puts their family factor as an information-sharing hub for them politically.

Furthermore, a study in the United States used social learning theory can be used to explain how parents of family members transfer their political beliefs and world view to the children especially if their political exposure is high by having consistent political cues over time (Jennings et al., 2009). This would allow for a much clearer explanation of the effect of family and their exposure. This is consistent with previous research that supports the idea that family is an important influence on political exposure for people (Cross & Young, 2008; Hadi Samsi et al., 2023; Mohamad Razali et al., 2016; Zulkifli et al., 2021). Therefore, the family exposure to the informants when they were younger contributed to their predisposition to their political party in Sabah and later on affected their membership choice.

Family support is one of the micro themes established in this research. This support is focused on how the informant's family was responsible not only for introducing politics to the political party's worldview but also at the same time how they supported the informants to be members as well. The encouragement from their family provided continuous and stable support for them to be a part of the political party in Sabah and be active members. It is noted that their family members are already in the political party and are very supportive of the party. This then leads them to be not only exposed to a political party but later groomed to be a political party member. Previous studies have shown that partisan allegiances are passed down through the generations (Bob-Milliar, 2012; Jennings et al., 2009).

The informants showed that familial support can form into a future with their political party through their support and that it is at times something that is considered for them, especially for those members that have family members that have positions previously within their political party, this encouragement from the family helps to propel their partisan ambition within political party, making some of the informants having positions within the party. In previous research familial exposure can affect the way children view political leanings (Hadi Samsi et al., 2023; Jennings et al., 2009; Mallinson & Hatemi, 2018), and family members that are inclined to a particular party and are active there will likely be to support their family members to follow suit and they will in effect follow because of the way they perceive conformity to their family is to be what they are

as seen in how we conform our behavior to suit our surrounding. This is consistent with earlier literature supporting that family has been a central core for political dissemination.

STUDY CONTRIBUTION AND CONCLUSION

Sabah Bumiputera political participation is a growing body of literature that covers the political insights and experiences of the local Bumiputera in Sabah. Through the years, Bumiputera participation has been documented and discussed in various research and articles. This however was mainly discussed in terms of general participation or focusing on the Bumiputera. There is little research done on the specifics of non-Malay Bumiputera support for political parties in Sabah. The research's initial exploration tries to paint why a Malay-dominated national party was able to play a strong political role in Sabah despite Malay being one of the smaller represented ethnicities in Sabah. This research has uncovered the intricate relationship that creates such sentiments in Sabah. The role of family plays a crucial role in cementing support into the heart of political supporters in Sabah.

This research offers an exploration that is focused on the non-Malay Bumiputera in Sabah. Through the knowledge obtained, themes have emerged to clarify the political dimension that wraps the Sabahan political shrouds under the familial influence. The family influence in political support will be a good point of departure to investigate and explain future ethnic politics in Sabah. It will allow for political analysis to predict and analyze political support and movement in Sabah whether it would be with old parties and coalitions or new ones.

In conclusion, the study shows the reflective influence of familial values on the political support of non-Malay Bumiputera towards non-local political parties in Sabah. Through qualitative methods and thematic analysis, it reveals that family plays a key role in determining political support. This research emphasizes the complex relationship between family dynamics and political behaviour, highlighting how deeply environment, personal, and communal ties affect political leanings. The findings contribute to understanding the complex political landscape in Sabah, particularly the significant support for non-local parties among non-Malay Bumiputera. This research covers the way for future studies to delve deeper into other influential factors such as ideology, party, religion, ethnicity, gender, and locality, which further define the state's political dynamics. By exploring these additional dimensions, future research can provide a more

comprehensive understanding of political support in Sabah, enriching the discourse on political participation and party support within this diverse state.

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