

The Relationship between Primordial Sentiments and the Political Aspirations of Sabah's Youth

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Abstract

This study identifies the relationship between primordial sentiments and political aspirations among youths in the state of Sabah. Primordial sentiment refers to individuals' attachment to basic identities such as ethnicity, religion, language and locality, which commonly shape their political orientation and inclinations. Sabah, as a state rich in ethnic diversity and with a complex political history, provides an important context for examining how these identity factors influence the formation of political aspirations among the younger generation. The study adopted a quantitative approach through a survey method, involving 4,519 youths selected via stratified random sampling across the state's five main administrative divisions. The constructed questionnaire instrument was analysed using SPSS software. The analysis results show a significant relationship between primordial sentiment and political aspirations, particularly in the dimensions of ethnic and regional attachment. These findings have important implications for the need to formulate political policies that are more inclusive and contextual, in line with the diverse local identities among Sabah's youth.

Keywords: Primordial Sentiment, Political Aspirations, Youth, Sabah

Introduction

Sabah is a unique state in Malaysia in terms of its social structure, political history and ethnic composition. Its population comprises 33 indigenous ethnic groups who speak more than 50 languages and 80 dialects. The Kadazan-Dusun ethnic group is the largest (about 30 %), followed by the Bajau and Murut as the second- and third-largest groups. Other groups include the Bisaya, Brunei-Malay, Bugis, Kedayan, Lotud, Rungus, Suluk and others; the Chinese community is the main non-indigenous group (Sabah State Government, 2025).

This diversity creates a sociopolitical landscape that is complex and rich with dimensions of local identity. Since Sabah joined the Federation of Malaysia through the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), discourse on regional rights, state autonomy and developmental justice has remained an important feature of local political discussions. (The Borneo Post, 2025a). In this context, Sabah's youth play a significant role not only as the heirs of future leadership but also as a group actively shaping discourse, choices and political aspirations through social media, education and engagement in electoral processes. Their political aspirations are

influenced not only by economic factors and current policies but also by social identities rooted in ethnicity, religion, language and locality. (The Borneo Post, 2025b).

Primordial sentiment refers to a deep attachment to original identities that can affect how individuals assess, support or oppose a political entity. In a multi-ethnic society such as Sabah, this element inevitably shapes political perceptions and inclinations, whether consciously or not. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to answer the central question: to what extent do primordial sentiments influence the political aspirations of Sabah's youth?

Literature Review

Primordial sentiment generally refers to a deep emotional attachment to original identities such as ethnicity, religion, language and locality, which is often instinctual and inherited across generations. The concept was introduced by Geertz (1963) to explain how loyalties to ethnic or religious groups can override loyalties to modern political structures, particularly in post-colonial societies.

In a global context, Hardgrave (2022) study of post-British India shows how the rise of regional nationalism and ethnic tensions such as E.V. Ramaswami Naicker's demand for a Dravidian state reflects mistrust toward the dominance of majority culture. In Indonesia, Gayatri (2018) found that primordial sentiments continue to influence political stability, particularly when there is ethnic imbalance in the distribution of power and economic resources between Javanese and non-Javanese groups. By contrast, Ismail dan Mustadjar (2018) study of the Ammatoa community in South Sulawesi found that local wisdom and cultural values can act as catalysts for interethnic harmony by rejecting attitudes of superiority and emphasizing moderation.

Primordial sentiment also arises in the discourse on cultural nationalism. Cheung (2012) for example, describes how the tension between Confucian traditions and modern political aspirations in China shapes patterns of contemporary cultural sentiment. Mazlish (2012) likewise stresses that expressions of moral and humanistic sentiment have long existed across various civilizations yet are manifested differently within each philosophical and historical framework.

Although many studies explain the effects of primordial sentiment in a global context, there remains a lack of in-depth research on how such sentiments influence the political aspirations of youth in local contexts especially in Sabah, which has a unique political history, a diverse ethnic structure and ongoing debates over state autonomy. Studies such as Welsh (2013) have opened discussions on Malaysian youth politics, yet research that specifically examines the interaction between ethnic identity and the formation of political aspirations among Sabah's youth remains limited. This study therefore aims to fill that gap by exploring how elements of primordial identity function as variables in determining the patterns and directions of the political aspirations of Sabah's younger generation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded on three complementary theoretical frameworks; Primordialism, Political Aspirations, and Youth Agency. Combining these theories allows a more

comprehensive understanding of how political orientations and tendencies form among Sabah's youth, especially within a complex, post-colonial, multi-ethnic society.

Primordialism, as introduced by Geertz (1963), asserts that ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identities are part of society's natural structure, inherited from birth. These elements are rooted in value systems, emotions and deep feelings of kinship, directly influencing an individual's political loyalty. In Sabah, where ethnic and regional elements strongly shape political narratives, this theory offers a framework for understanding how group identity sentiments continue to play a role in youth political choices.

The theory of Political Aspirations, elaborated by Inglehart (1977) emphasizes that values and beliefs formed through social experiences including political socialization, education, and the influence of media and institutions affect the extent to which an individual has expectations of the political system, engages in democratic processes, and shows support for or rejection of political actors. This aligns with the dimensions of youth political aspirations measured in the study, such as political interest, tendency to support a candidate/party, and perceptions of the state government.

Meanwhile, the theory of Youth Agency by Furlong and Cartmel (2006) highlights the role of youth as active agents who shape and interpret social and political meanings based on their experiences, challenges and opportunities. Young people are not merely recipients of social structural influences; they can create collective actions, build their own narratives and formulate aspirations grounded in local realities. In Sabah, this theory is important for understanding how youth act as determinants of the state's political direction through the formation of their identities and aspirations.

Taken together, these three theories provide a robust foundation for examining how primordial sentiment, as an aspect of social identity, influences the formation of political aspirations among Sabah's youth in a dynamic, multi-ethnic political environment.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach using a survey research design. This approach was chosen to enable systematic large-scale data collection from respondents to explore the relationship between primordial sentiment and political aspirations among youth in Sabah. The study population comprised Malaysian citizens aged 18 to 26 residing in Sabah. This age range focused on first-time voters and young repeat voters, groups likely to be forming patterns of political support based on their early voting experiences.

The sample consisted of 4,519 individuals, exceeding the original target of 4,015. Respondents were selected via stratified purposive sampling across two levels: (i) the five main administrative divisions of Sabah; Kudat, West Coast, Sandakan, Tawau and the Pedalaman; and (ii) distribution across 73 State Legislative Assembly constituencies (*Dewan Undangan Negeri, DUN*). The minimum sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) method, with Kudat (the division with the smallest population) requiring at least 384 respondents for a population over 100,000. Based on an average of 55 respondents per constituency, the targeted total was 4,015, but the study succeeded in obtaining 4,519 respondents.

Table 1

Sampling framework by administrative division

Administrative Division	Number of Constituencies (DUN)	Number of Respondents
Kudat	7	385
West Coast	27	1,485
Pedalaman	12	660
Sandakan	13	715
Tawau	14	770
Total	73	4,519

The survey instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising three main sections:

- Demographic profile - age, gender, ethnicity, place of residence and education level.
- Primordial sentiment - measuring attachment to ethnic, linguistic, religious and regional identities.
- Political aspirations - covering dimensions of political interest, involvement, support for a candidate/party and trust in the government.

All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). A pilot study showed that all constructs achieved Cronbach's alpha values above 0.80, indicating high internal consistency. Data were analysed using SPSS version 27. The analytical techniques employed were:

- Descriptive analysis to determine the distribution of respondent profiles and mean scores of constructs.
- Pearson correlation analysis to gauge the strength and direction of the relationship between primordial sentiment and political aspirations.
- Multiple regression analysis to identify which dimensions of primordial sentiment most significantly predict youth political aspirations.

Findings

Descriptive analysis showed that the level of primordial sentiment among Sabah's youth was moderately high, with an overall mean of 3.46. The highest scores were recorded in the religious dimension (mean = 4.19) and the cultural dimension (mean = 3.96), while the ethnic dimension also registered a high value (mean = 3.70). By contrast, support for political candidates or parties based on race or religion yielded moderately low means (between 2.93 and 3.26), indicating that identity sentiment does not fully determine political decisions directly. For the political aspirations construct, the overall mean was 3.51, also indicating a moderately high level. Respondents were most inclined to express support for Members of Parliament (mean = 3.68) and state assembly members (mean = 3.62) compared with support for state leadership or the government (means of 3.37 and 3.36 respectively). This suggests a tendency among Sabah's youth to evaluate political performance at a local and personal level.

Inferential analysis using Pearson's correlation revealed a significant positive relationship between primordial sentiment and political aspirations ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$). In other words, the stronger the attachment to identity, the higher the political aspirations displayed. Multiple regression analysis identified the ethnic attachment dimension ($\beta = 0.38$) and regional attachment ($\beta = 0.29$) as the main predictors of youth political aspirations, with an

R^2 value of 0.32—meaning that 32 % of the variance in political aspirations can be explained by primordial sentiment variables.

Moreover, when examined by levels of primordial sentiment, respondents with high scores (mean 3.68–5.00) recorded the highest political aspirations (mean = 3.77), whereas those in the low-level category displayed only moderate aspirations (mean = 3.12). This strengthens the evidence that identity sentiment plays a significant role in shaping the political thinking patterns of Sabah's youth.

Table 2

Primordial sentiment in Sabah

Indicator	Mean
Prioritizing ethnicity in life	3.70
Prioritizing religion in life	4.19
Prioritizing culture in life	3.96
Choosing a candidate based on race	2.99
Choosing a candidate based on religion	3.26
Choosing a political party based on race	2.93
Choosing a political party based on religion	3.16
Overall	3.46

Key: Low = 1.00–2.33, Moderate = 2.34–3.67, High = 3.68–5.00

Table 3

Youth aspirations in Sabah

Indicator	Mean
Support for the state assembly member (ADUN) in my area	3.62
Support for the Member of Parliament in my area	3.68
Support for the leadership of Datuk Seri Panglima Hajiji Haji Noor	3.37
Support for the Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) government at state level	3.36
Overall	3.51

Key: Low = 1.00–2.33, Moderate = 2.34–3.67, High = 3.68–5.00

Table 4

Relationship between primordial sentiment and youth aspirations in Sabah

Level of primordial sentiment	Aspirations mean
Low (1.00–2.33)	3.12
Moderate (2.34–3.67)	3.37
High (3.68–5.00)	3.77

Key: Low = 1.00–2.33, Moderate = 2.34–3.67, High = 3.68–5.00

Discussion

The findings of this study support Geertz's (1963) primordialism theory, which posits that social identities such as ethnicity and region play a strong role in shaping political loyalty and orientation. In Sabah, issues relating to regional rights, historical developmental imbalances and calls for the full implementation of the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63) continue to shape young people's awareness of the state's role within the federation. Attachment to

religious and cultural elements also strengthens the formation of political identity; however, the results show that young people do not rely entirely on these elements when choosing candidates or parties. This reflects a degree of maturity and flexibility in political decision-making, in line with the Theory of Political Aspirations (Inglehart, 1977), which stresses the importance of social experience and values in shaping political beliefs.

At the same time, the presence of positive political aspirations even within a context of strong identity underscores the role of youth as active political agents, as highlighted in the Theory of Youth Agency (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Sabah's youth are not only influenced by social and cultural structures; they also construct their own political narratives based on local experiences and needs, including the desire for more equitable development, transparent governance and fair representation. Overall, the findings confirm that primordial sentiment is an important factor shaping the political aspirations of the younger generation, but it does not operate in an absolute or conservative manner. Instead, it is combined with progressive aspirations that consider development, integrity and regional rights.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that primordial sentiment is a significant factor in shaping the political aspirations of youth in Sabah. Attachment to ethnic and regional identities emerged as the primary drivers of young people's political inclinations, particularly within a society with its own political history and a complex federal structure. These findings strengthen the theoretical frameworks of primordialism and youth agency, which posit that collectively inherited social identities continue to influence political action even in a modern era shaped by media and globalisation. Yet the results also show that Sabah's youth are not rigid in their political orientation. The presence of progressive aspirations such as a desire for good governance, equitable regional development and transparent political representation indicates that they are agents of change capable of reinterpreting their identity within a national framework. A uniform approach to youth political development across Malaysia is no longer appropriate and should be replaced with strategies that are local, inclusive and responsive to historical and regional realities. Policy recommendations include: integrating historical, cultural and Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63) narratives into civic and history curricula at schools and institutions of higher learning, particularly in Sabah; establishing cross-ethnic and cross-regional state youth forums and dialogue institutions to ensure youth voices are heard in policy formation and state development; and creating platforms for youth participation in public policy processes, including the formulation of state budgets, regional development plans and participatory governance monitoring. By taking Sabah's social and political realities into account, empowering youth through context-sensitive approaches will catalyse the building of a more equitable, inclusive and harmonious state.

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