

XENOPHOBIA AND ANTI-FEDERAL SENTIMENT IN SABAH AND ITS IMPACT ON MALAYSIAN FEDERALISM

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22452/jati.vol27no1.4>

Abstract

Xenophobia carries the notion of fear and hatred towards other foreign races. It is a social disease that can destroy the harmony and peace of society, especially in multi-racial and multi-ethnic countries. In the context of the federal state, xenophobia refers to the fear and hatred of a provincial community towards another province or the federal government as they feel that their rights are being taken away or denied by the federal government. This article discusses the xenophobia of Sabahans towards the federal government resulting from the feeling that the federal government is a 'foreigner' who has deprived them of their rights as enshrined in the 1963 Malaysia Agreement and the 20-point Agreement. This article utilised the concept of xenophobia as a tool of analysis. Primary data was taken from interviews with authoritative informants, whereas secondary data was obtained from books, theses, articles, newspapers, government documents and news portals. This article argues that the xenophobia of the Sabahan people has given birth to anti-federal groups that threaten the integrity of the federation but not to the point of being able to break the federation.

Keywords: xenophobia, anti-federal group, 20-point agreement, Sabah, Malaysia

Introduction

In a multi-ethnic federal state, the feeling of xenophobia is a problem that hinders national harmony owing to the existence of a society that sees its own race as superior to others. Therefore, xenophobia can be defined as a multi-dimensional and multi-ethnic phenomenon as it is closely related to the concepts of nationalism

and ethnocentrism. Miller (2018) mentioned the presence of regions in a country with a society that possesses a very strong xenophobic nature while other regions reject the overall nature of xenophobia. This is evidenced by the thinking patterns and values of American society (US). Most white-majority communities in the southern US such as Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia exhibit more xenophobic traits than in west coast areas such as California, Chicago, and Oregon, which are more open to outsiders. Aspects such as physical space, culture, gender, ethnic and class composition as well as history are important factors that determine xenophobic beliefs in these societies (Miller, 2018).

In southern Africa, the issue of xenophobia was quite pronounced during the implementation of the apartheid policy in the country from 1948 to 1994 (Dubow, 2014), which separates white from non-white citizens since they feel that non-whites hold a lower status. In the country, all forms of racial discrimination are legal and these laws have been abused by white rulers to ensure their powers or dominance over the black majority race. This difference was due to the xenophobic nature of whites towards non-whites. As a result, this policy provoked violence and huge political conflicts in South Africa.

In the context of Malaysia, Yusoff (2006) explained that xenophobia exists in every layer of society. This is because as a plural country, each ethnicity is thick with its own tribal and sectarian spirit. As a result, this gives rise to the problem of xenophobia that damages the harmony of ethnic and regional relations in the country. In Sabah, the existence of xenophobia in its society does not only focus on other ethnicities and foreign cultures but also on the people in the Peninsula who come to conduct business and work since this issue seizes their life opportunities. In addition, the people of Sabah were dissatisfied and angry with the federal government as considered it an 'outsider' that seizes Sabah's rights and wealth. Apart from that, it was because the federal government did not comply with the 1963 Malaysia Agreement and the 20-point Agreement that were mutually agreed upon during the formation of Malaysia in 1963.

The result of this xenophobic attitude raised the anti-federal sentiment of the people of Sabah towards the federal government. Accordingly, this article discusses this issue and its impact on Malaysian federalism.

Reassessing the Concept of Xenophobia

Xenophobia is a trait and behaviour that can be found in every part of the world's society. It comes from the Greek word *xenos*, which means stranger, and *phobos*, which means fear. The combination of these two words refers to a feeling of fear or hatred towards another race or tribe that is seen as foreign.

According to the International Labour Office (ILO), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2001, p. 2), xenophobia is an ethnic majority attitude, prejudice, and behaviour that rejects outsiders or strangers from living in their community. Smelser and Baltes (2001) described xenophobia as 'fear of the stranger', but there are times when xenophobia is also used to mean 'hatred of strangers'. In this context, Boehnke (cited in *Report of the NGO working group* [2001]) defined xenophobia as "an attitudinal orientation of hostility against non-natives in a given population" (p. 2).

Steenkamp (2009) stated that xenophobia is an attitude of intolerance, fear of strangers, and ethnocentrism formed in individual identity. This attitude exists from the feeling of the majority ethnic group who often consider themselves better than other tribes or races. In India, xenophobia has given birth to the caste system by the ancient Indian society in the country (Béteille, 1991). The definition shows that xenophobia is not just a fear of foreigners, but also related to the values of ethnocentrism, which views the high dignity of one race or ethnicity compared to other ethnicities. In addition, Berezin (2006, p. 275) stated the meaning of xenophobia as follows: "... as attitudes, prejudices, and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity." Hence, xenophobia can be understood as a prejudicial attitude and action against outsiders from being in a community.

Harris (2001, p. 10) stated that xenophobia arises for the following reasons: "*the fear of loss of social status and identity; a threat, perceived or real, to citizens' economic success; a way of reassuring the national self and its boundaries in times of national crisis.*" Therefore, hatred and fear of foreigners as the reasons above have made xenophobia a social and political problem facing today's world. This can be seen from the hatred of the ethnic majority towards refugees, as well as the ethnic and religious issues that occur in the world today. In Europe, many countries refuse to accept the arrival of refugees from troubled countries, hence leading to a humanitarian crisis. This is similar to the oppression of ethnic minorities as is the case in Myanmar and Kashmir or Islamophobia, all due to the presence of xenophobic sentiment towards foreign objects or outsiders (Ullah & Chatteraj, 2018; Moten, 2019).

Xenophobia not only exists at the level of society but also at the level of administration and governance of a country. As pointed out by Miller (2018), a major challenge related to xenophobia in a contemporary context is how it has been institutionalised by political actors to instil fear of immigrants and 'outsiders', thus leading to violence against foreigners. To date, there are still

countries that have failed to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in an effort to foster understanding among all races besides combating oppressive policies (United Nations, 1965). This shows that there are still countries that have xenophobic attitudes towards ethnic minorities, which is the cause of racial conflicts and ethnic wars such as crimes against humanity in Burundi and Rwanda in 1994, as well as Bosnia Herzegovina in 1995 (Dailey, 2008; Bergholz, 2016; McDoom, 2020).

The problem of xenophobia also occurs in the context of multi-ethnic federations like Malaysia. The Malays feel that they are the indigenous people of Malaya and therefore must be the Malay *staatsvolk*, which is the pillar and foundation of the government of this country (Ahmad Tajudin & Yusoff, 2020). This worries ethnic minorities such as the Kadazan, Dusun, and Murut in Sabah who feel that they are indeed a minority ethnic group at the federal level but are the majority ethnic group in Sabah. This feeling later increased their xenophobia to reject the people of the Peninsula in Sabah. In addition, they felt that the federal government has taken away their rights to autonomy as agreed in MA63 and the 20-point Agreement. It is this xenophobic attitude caused by the failure of the federal government to implement MA63 leading to the emergence of anti-federal sentiment among them.

This shows that besides being translated as feelings of dislike or hatred towards individuals, groups, or countries that are considered 'outsiders/foreigners', xenophobia can be also seen as a manifestation of values that describe the political ideology of a race. According to Wimmer (1997), xenophobia is an element in a political struggle about people who deserve attention from society and the state. In other words, xenophobia arises when a person's right to benefit from the government is denied. In the context of this definition, this article discusses why Sabahans are xenophobic towards outsiders, the effects of this attitude, and the actions that should be taken by the government to address this sentiment.

Previous Studies on Xenophobia

Faine (2012) discussed cultural differences of Catalonia with other regions in Spain that factored into the emergence of xenophobia and populist ideology in the region. He noted that Catalonia experienced rapid population growth due to migration during the industrial revolution. Thereafter, between 1961 and 1975, as many as one million migrants entered Catalonia and from 2000 to 2010, another million migrated to the region. This shows that the population growth in Catalonia was as much as 350%, causing the existence of xenophobia among the population of Catalonia towards immigrants who entered their territory. Faine (2012) stated

that the increase in migrants led to the radical right-wing party Plataforma per Catalunya (PxC) being formed in 2002 as a reflection of the dissatisfaction of the people of Catalonia towards immigrants.

The development of the nationalism ideology initiated by the PxC party has caused more people in Catalonia to have anti-immigrant feelings as well as Islamophobia. Faine (2012) explained three reasons behind these occurrences. First, the party leader, Anglada, has a background with the right-wing extremist fascist party in Francoist, Spain. She has also run a media campaign against the construction of mosques in Catalonia and the wearing of burqas by Muslim women in the province. Second, the party has always advocated Islamophobic and anti-democratic discourse. Third, there were also members of the PxC party who are experienced in being involved in episodes of violence against immigrants and members of the left-wing movement. Faine (2012) associated this phenomenon with the feelings of nationalism and racism of the party members to give birth to the terms "we" and also "foreign". At the end of his analysis, Faine concluded that the role of Catalonia's local political parties is an important factor in cultivating feelings of xenophobia in Catalan society.

Marinzel (2014) discussed the Catalonia referendum in January 2014. He attributed this referendum to the secession movement in Catalonia due to the high nationalism of its populous territory. This is because the history of Catalonia is different from other Spanish provinces. This feeling is closely linked to the three centuries of oppression that once took place in the region. Another factor is that the people of Catalonia want to protect their culture and language besides wanting to manage their own regional economy. Moreover, Marinzel (2014) also discussed the Spanish Constitution of 1978. He stated that although Catalonia gained autonomy from this constitution, it often forced the central government to grant greater autonomy. This pressure grew so that it could also be felt by the Spanish league football team, especially in the match between Barcelona and Real Madrid. This strong xenophobic and anti-federal attitude of Catalan society had caused two local parties, Convergencia i Unio (CiU) and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), to spread the ideology of self-determination among the people of Catalonia independence and separation from the central government.

In addition, Marinzel (2014) also assessed the economic impact on Catalonia in the event of secession. He noted that although Catalonia was a significant export market to the Spanish economy, its separation from Spain would cause it to lose its status as a member of the European Union. Marinzel said that with the loss of this status, Catalonia would be subject to tariffs on its trade with all its major trading partners, would have to introduce new currencies, and would lose investors as well as large multinational companies. Lastly, Catalonia has to

fund the cost of social services currently covered by the central government. This situation will burden the economy of Catalonia. At the end of his analysis, Marinzel (2014) asserted that the separation of Catalonia from Spain due to xenophobic attitudes is an absurd act and will not succeed as its losses on Catalonia were huge.

Claassen (2017) discussed the practice of xenophobia in South African countries. He used a historical approach to explain the history of inter-ethnic violence and prejudice in South Africa. He noted that the rise of xenophobia in the country was due to resource competition, poverty, social mobilisation and dissatisfaction with the government. The black people hate whites, let alone the apartheid policy in the country.

Awang Pawi, Abdul Rahman, Fauzi, and Mansor (2016) assessed the ethnocentrism sentiment played out by Sarawak chief minister Adenan Satem in his governing policies. The article employed the concepts of nationalism and ethnocentrism as its tools of analysis. They stated that Adenan Satem's demand for the federal government to implement Sarawak's autonomy in 18 articles of the 1963 Malaysia Agreement (MA63) had caused the people of Sarawak to have the feeling of xenophobia towards the federal government. Sentiments of ethnocentrism and xenophobia as ideas of his political ideology have already made him popular. In the 2016 Sarawak state election, the BN party led by Adenan in Sarawak won 72 out of a total of 82 seats. This indicates that the ethnocentrism and xenophobia sentiments of the local community are important in determining the party's victory in the elections.

This is also agreed by Lee (2019). Lee (2019) assessed the relationship between the federal government and Sarawak after the defeat of Barisan Nasional (BN) in the 14th general election (GE). Lee (2019) stated that BN's defeat in GE-14 had led to the dissolution of the BN coalition in Sarawak, which later saw the emergence of a new coalition of local Sarawak parties in the Sarawak Parties Alliance (GPS). GPS, which is no longer tied to the previous BN government's policies, has started to raise local issues and Sarawak's autonomy rights as enshrined in MA63 and 18-point Agreement more aggressively. This included demanding balanced regional development, oil royalty of 20% and equal status between Sarawak and Sabah with the Malaya. The struggle of these local issues has given rise to the xenophobic sentiments of the Sarawak community to the point of threatening the integrity of the federation and Malaysian federalism.

Chin (2019a) discussed hotly debated issues in Sabah and Sarawak politics. The issues are the special position of Sabah and Sarawak as autonomous territories, the issue of consent of the people of Sabah and Sarawak as well as the role of the British in the formation of the Malaysian federation, the federal

government's intervention in bringing in the UMNO political model, the formation of GPS after BN's defeat in GE-14, the fall BN in Sabah, and the rise of nationalism in Sabah and Sarawak. Chin (2019a) stated that the state government's continued demand for their autonomy rights was a form of an anti-federal movement that created xenophobia among the people of Sabah and Sarawak towards the central government whom they considered as 'outsider' in their state politics. This xenophobic and anti-federal sentiment has given rise to an anti-federal movement that challenges the integrity of the federation.

Chin (2019b) illustrated the frustration of the people of Sabah and Sarawak towards MA63. Among the frustrations were the amalgamation of Sabah and Sarawak into the Federation of Malaysia without real consent, the abolition of recognition of Sabah and Sarawak's status as the founders of the Malaysian federation, the marginalisation of the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak, and federal interference in state politics. This frustration gave rise to xenophobia as well as hatred and anger of the Sarawak people towards the federal government.

Welsh (2020) has explored the polarisation of religion, race and reform that has plagued Malaysia. He noted that since independence in 1957, the Malay ethnic majority had enjoyed a special status protected by the constitution, while the ethnic minority had been treated as second-class citizens. Nevertheless, what makes Malaysia's polarisation so complex is religion. He stated that the political elite always preached on this sentiment to mobilise their supporters until the emergence of hatred among the Malay ethnic majority towards the minority. As a result, these polarising issues have crippled efforts to reach a political compromise, hampered the implementation of much-needed reforms, and triggered political instability. The destructive effects of polarisation were evident in February 2020 when the Sheraton Move for the Malay majority came back to power. Although polarisation is still limited to the elite level, it is increasingly pervasive in Malaysian society, endangering inter-ethnic harmony, and eroding social cohesion.

Past studies have demonstrated that problems from racial, cultural, linguistic and historical differences are factors for the emergence of xenophobia in one ethnic group towards other ethnicities or communities. In addition, the core of race-based politics is also a factor in the emergence of xenophobia. Another important factor is the xenophobic attitude that arises since the people of the province feel angry and hateful towards the central government that discriminates against their right to autonomy or development of the region. This article complements the previous studies above by discussing the xenophobic attitude of

the local majority ethnic towards the central government in Malaysia with reference to the case of Sabah.

Research Methodology

This article applied a qualitative method that was analysed descriptively. This method was chosen owing to its flexible nature and suitability for examining the phenomenon studied, namely the xenophobic sentiment of Sabahans towards the central government whom they consider as an 'outsider' who exploit their state wealth.

Study data were taken from primary sources through interviews with authoritative informants. Among them are Salleh Said Keruak (former communications and multimedia minister and Usukan assemblyman), Musli Oli (former Sabah PKR deputy information chief), Georgina George (former UPKO deputy secretary-general), and Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar (minister in the Prime Minister's Department for parliament and affairs). Secondary sources were obtained from books, journal articles, newspapers, government reports, and news portals. The data collected were analysed descriptively.

Findings and Discussion

Xenophobic sentiment in Sabah

Xenophobia is often understood as a feeling of dislike or hatred towards individuals or groups who are considered 'foreigners' based on race, origin, ethnicity, race, colour, religion, gender, and sexual orientation factors. The emergence of this xenophobia attitude is because the ethnic majority is afraid of losing social status and identity, and fears economic monopoly by the minority. However, xenophobia is not a social problem of a local nature. Miller (2018) stated that the nature of xenophobia has no geographical boundaries and limitations. In the US, it is concentrated in southern US regions such as Mississippi and Alabama compared to US west coast regions such as California and Oregon, which are more open to immigrants. Xenophobia has also often been associated with hatred towards immigrants and foreigners. This is also not always true, since the reality is that foreigners and immigrants are often used as 'scapegoats' (Yakushko, 2009).

Similarly, in Sabah, the Bumiputera often render themselves superior and top natives of Sabah from other races. Oli explained:

Since they feel that they are superior and great, the people of Sabah have a high sense of tribalism and sectarianism. This spirit makes them think of this land as their sole right and property. Therefore, they would be

unhappy if their status as natives of the state is compromised when approached by outsiders. The influx of Filipinos and Indonesian immigrants into Sabah further frightened Sabahans about their special status being invaded. (M. Oli, personal communication, 17 January 2022)

According to Yusoff (2002, p. 8), among the main concerns of Sabahans include immigrants from the Peninsula and the Philippines involved in business and politics in Sabah, which will cause their job opportunities to be taken. Apart from that, the people of Sabah are also worried that their political power will be taken over by outsiders since those who have obtained identity cards are becoming active in Sabah politics. This concern causes them to show xenophobic attitudes leading to the phenomenon of racism. Adding to the above argument, Oli explained:

Sabahans are also afraid of outsiders because the racist tolerance of outsiders is not similar to Sabahans. The ethnic relations among the people of Sabah are good. In matters of religion, mosques and churches can be adjacent. Sabahans also celebrate the Keamatan festival together. However, when there are outsiders who start questioning the halal and haram of certain practices and festivals of the Sabah community as well as bringing the influence of political parties from the Peninsula to Sabah, making them feel uncomfortable. The emergence of xenophobia will damage their freedom and tolerance through the presence of these outsiders. For the people of Sabah, they feel uneasy with the attitude of outsiders, especially Malays from the Peninsula who cannot accept non-Muslim Sabahans using the word Allah. Things like this are what cause the emergence of xenophobia in Sabah to outsiders. (M. Oli, personal communication, 17 January 2022)

Apart from that, Sabahans also have a xenophobic attitude towards other outsiders, especially from Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, and the southern Philippines. They feel that the arrival of these outsiders has narrowed employment opportunities, increased the living standards, created more prevalent social symptoms, and caused more acute criminal cases (Dollah, Wan Hassan, Peters, & Omar, 2003). Not only that, the government's service to immigrants, especially illegal immigrants (PATI) is also a factor in the existence of xenophobia in Sabah society. George in an interview with her stated:

The people of Sabah think that illegal immigrants are big criminals who come to rob and damage their state. With various problems including health, schooling, hygiene and most importantly, the status of citizenship given that allows them to vote, these immigrants further changed the social and political landscape of Sabah. (G. George, personal communication, 12 January 2022)

In addition, the central government's attitude of discriminating against Sabah's autonomy rights as agreed in MA63 also caused Sabahans to hate the central government, which they considered as an outsider from their territory. This situation increased the xenophobic attitude of Sabahans. Such a situation then allowed the emergence of anti-federal groups that influenced the indigenous people to oppose the central government for discriminating and taking away their rights. This is what affected Malaysian federalism, which is an aspect discussed in the next section.

Anti-Federal Sentiment of Sabahans

Anti-federalism is the opposition given by groups with different opinions from the federal government. Scholars listed three factors that caused the emergence of anti-federalism (McRoberts, 1997; Augustine, 2019; Aranda & Kölling, 2020). First, there are differences in culture and thinking of some provinces with other provinces as well as the central government. This can be seen in the case of Quebec, which has differences in culture, thinking and way of life, compared to other regions in Canada. Second is the factor of the division of power between the central and state governments. This will result in dissatisfaction between the two parties, hence creating hatred and an anti-federal attitude towards the central government. The third is the disappointment of not receiving fair services from the central government leading to the emergence of anti-federal feelings of a group to govern themselves.

In the case of Sabah, all three of the above factors have created xenophobia and anti-federal sentiment in the state. In addition, what is even more important is the failure of the federal government to implement Sabah's autonomy rights as agreed in the 20-point Agreement and MA63 (Yusoff, 2006). The 20-point Agreement is a section that has been included in the Malaysian Constitution 1963. The main purpose of the 20-point Agreement is to guarantee the rights and interests of the people of Sabah so that they are not compromised when joining the Federation of Malaysia. Among the important contents in 20-point Agreement include the status of Islam as the national religion being inapplicable in Sabah, the state government has control over immigration, Borneonisation of civil service, no

amendments related to the protection of Sabah's autonomous rights can be made without prior approval of the state government, Sabah has no right to secede from the federation, the indigenous people of Sabah enjoy the same 'special position' as the Malays in Malaya, and high autonomy is given to Sabah in their financial affairs. Sabah will also maintain its own control over finance, development expenditure and tariffs (Yusoff, 2006; Chin, 2019b).

Looking at the essence of the 20-point Agreement of the Malaysian Constitution, the people of Sabah saw that almost all 20 points enshrined in the constitution have been violated by the central government as they were 'ignored' by the federal government (Chin, 2019b). All the implementation of policies and matters related to the government of Sabah have been arranged by the central government without the consent of the state government and the people of Sabah. This in turn has aroused the people's xenophobia against the central government they regard as an outsider that has usurped their rights.

The xenophobic attitude of Sabahans towards the federal government was a result of their perception that their incorporation into the Federation of Malaysia was without consent, and that they were tricked into joining Malaysia. They argue that the Cobbold Commission's way of getting the voice of the people of Sabah and Sarawak on the merger of the Federation of Malaysia was not independent and biased. They saw that the five members of the Cobbold Commission, namely Lord Cobbold, Anthony Abell, David Watherston, Wong Pow Nee, and Ghazali Shafie, were not independent as they were representatives from the colonial office or the federal government of Malaya, without representatives from Sabah and Sarawak (Chin, 2019b). Therefore, they saw this commission as in favour of the formation of a federation of Malaysia, not the people of Sabah and Sarawak. They also saw how their voice on the issue of the merger of the Federation of Malaysia was unfairly treated, misinterpreted, and did not represent them. This is because the findings of the Cobbold Commission vote are as follow:

About one-third of the population of each territory strongly favours early realisation of Malaysia without too much concern about terms and conditions. Another third, many of them favourable to the Malaysia project, ask, with varying degrees of emphasis, for conditions and safeguards ... The remaining third is divided between those who insist on independence before Malaysia is considered and those who would strongly prefer to see British rule continue for some years to come. (Cobbold Commission Report, 1962, para 144)

Based on the above statement, the people of Sabah concluded that only one-third of the voters agreed to join the Federation of Malaysia, while the other two-thirds voted not to support or support conditionally. For the people of Sabah, this statement shows that only one-third of the votes were in favour, while the other two-thirds rejected the Malaysian federation (Abdullah & Mulia, 2018).

The dissatisfaction of the people of Sabah towards the federation was further strengthened in 1976 when the federal government amended Article 1 (2), which made Sabah and Sarawak two of the 13 states in the Federation of Malaysia (Bala, 2018). This amendment is deviated from the original agreement on the position of Sabah and Sarawak as in MA63, namely that Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore together with Malaya are the founders of the Federation of Malaysia. In the 1963 Constitution, Article 1 (2) of the Malaysian Constitution clearly states that the federation consists of three different political entities namely Malaya, Singapore and the states of Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak). However, this status changed in 1976 when the Malaysian Constitution was amended and the case concerning the three federal entities of Malaysia was removed (Abdullah, Bala, & Mulia, 2018). This therefore resulted in the dissatisfaction of the people of Sabah as they felt that MA63 was not appreciated by the federal government through the removal of the status of the state of Sabah as a province and the founder of the Federation of Malaysia.

Apart from that, they were also displeased when they saw backwardness in their state compared to other states in the Peninsula even though being in a state rich in petroleum revenue. For example, crude oil reserves in 2017 for the Peninsula were 1.669 billion barrels, 1.290 billion barrels for Sabah, and 1.767 billion barrels for Sarawak. For natural gas reserves in the same year, the Peninsula had a total of 25.659 Trillion Standard Cubic Feet (TSCF), Sabah 12.547TSCF, and Sarawak 692TSCF (*Malaysia energy statistics handbook*, 2018). The oil and natural gas industry categorised in the mining and quarrying sector contributed 26.4% to Sabah's GDP. Apart from that, Sabah is also a major producer of crude palm oil at 5.03 million tonnes in 2019 (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2020a). Ironically, although being a major producer of oil and natural gas, Sabah is still far behind in terms of infrastructure and socio-economic development.

For instance, most of the roads in Sabah are in very poor condition and unpaved. According to the *Laporan Statistik Jalan Malaysia* (2019), in 2017, the length of roads in the Peninsula was 166.3 thousand km (79.2% paved), Sarawak 29.6 thousand km (61.72% paved), and Sabah 22.1 thousand km (46.54% paved). The length of roads in Sabah is shorter compared to other states, not to mention the number of paved roads. This imbalance in development has caused the people of Sabah to be displeased with the central government and created a xenophobic

nature towards Kuala Lumpur for having 'stolen' Sabah's oil and natural gas revenues to finance development in the Peninsula (Chin, 2019a, p.214).

In terms of piped water supply and clean water supply, the people of Sabah also have less access and only rely on wells and rainwater catchment ponds as a source of water. Similarly, from the development of education and health, Sabah is still lagging compared to the states in the Peninsula. According to the *Sabah Post* (2020), a total of 589 schools from 1296 schools in Sabah are poor with 91 classified as poor on a scale of seven, which is unsafe to use. This figure explains that 45.4% of schools in Sabah are in poor condition and 15% of them are unsafe to use. Keruak in an interview with him revealed:

The existence of these poor schools stemmed from the failure of the federal government to provide sufficient allocation for the maintenance and construction of new schools. This situation angered the people of Sabah as education is among the promises of the federal government in the 20-point Agreement, which is to give Sabah autonomy to manage its own education. This anger has intensified the xenophobic attitude of the people of Sabah towards the federal government. (S. S. Keruak, personal communication, 19 November 2021)

Apart from that, the lack of technological tools and internet access to allow students to follow online learning also angered the people of Sabah. The Sabah Director of Education reported that 52% of students in Sabah do not have access to the internet, smartphones, computers or any mobile devices to enable them to pursue online learning (*Borneo Post Online*, 2020). The lack of internet access and the inability of students to own technological tools such as computers and mobile devices have widened the education gap between Sabah and other states. Such neglect then gave rise to the xenophobic attitude of the people of Sabah towards the federal government.

Not only that, but health facilities in Sabah are also at a lower level than other states in the Peninsula. George in an interview with her stated:

Imagine how bad the conditions of our health facilities are in Sabah. When Covid-19 attacked after the state election in 2020, the oxygen supply in the hospital was insufficient for the people affected by Covid who needed respiratory assistance. Imagine how severe is this shortage, which is why the people of Sabah have developed an extreme xenophobic attitude towards the Peninsula. They came here to usurp the rights of Sabah and

did not return the proceeds for the development of Sabah. (G. George, personal communication, 12 January 2022)

The statement of Georgina George above is correct if seen from the available data. According to Ministry of Health records (Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, 2019), the ratio of doctors to the population for the state of Sabah is the highest in Malaysia, which is 1:856 people compared to Kelantan with 1:757, Kedah with 1:680, Terengganu with 1:595, and Sarawak with 1:662. The ratio of doctors to the population is above the national ratio of 1:530. The shortage of manpower coupled with the vastness and challenging geography has resulted in the failure of the people of Sabah to receive good health services compared to other states. This situation gives rise to the xenophobic attitude of the people of Sabah towards the people of the Peninsula as they felt that the federal government was being unfair and discriminated against them by giving priority to development only in the Peninsula compared to Sabah.

Sabah then became less developed, causing the socio-economic status of the people of Sabah to be left behind compared to other states. This gap can be seen from the household per capita income, which shows that Sabah's average per capita income for 2019 was RM5745 compared to Sarawak with RM5959, Penang with RM7774, Johor with RM8013, Federal Territory with RM12840, and Selangor with RM13,257. Although this position is not the lowest, it was still below the national average per capita income line of RM7901 (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2020b). This is what led to the xenophobic attitude of the people of Sabah towards Kuala Lumpur since they assumed that their right to autonomy is not exercised as agreed in MA63 and the 20-point Agreement.

The xenophobic attitude of the people of Sabah towards the Peninsula can also be seen from the way they reject the political parties of the Peninsula. The majority of Sabahans feel there is no need to involve Peninsular political parties in the Sabah political arena. George in an interview with her stated:

I do not want the party from the Peninsular to be involved in Sabah politics. They do not understand our way of life and culture. Our people are known to be tolerant of racial and religious ties, and we live in harmony with mutual respect for each other's religions and customs. The advent of the Peninsular party that is thick with Malay racism will ruin the harmony of our relationship. We in Sabah have high respect for each other's religion, culture and tradition, which had been the state's uniqueness and strength. (G. George, personal communication, 12 January 2022)

Oli also agreed with the above statement. He mentioned:

If the political parties of the Peninsula enter Sabah, all the political problems of the Peninsula will start to become the problems of the people of Sabah. The racist political ideology of the Peninsula will worsen the unity of society in Sabah. (M. Oli, personal communication, 17 January 2022)

This xenophobia later developed into anti-federalism sentiment, which is getting stronger with the emergence of the anti-federal group named Sabah Sarawak Keluar Malaysia (SSKM) and political parties that are also active in spreading this sentiment. This statement is correct if seen from the main goal of SSKM's struggle, which is to separate Sabah and Sarawak from Peninsular Malaysia and establish a new state called The Republic of North Borneo and Republic of Sarawak (Sabah Sarawak Keluar Malaysia [SSKM]–Sabah Sarawak Union [UK], 2016). In addition, SSKM also wanted the United Kingdom and the United Nations to recognise its mission to be a non-governmental organisation that does not side with any political party in Malaysia (Liu & Saibeh, 2016).

The anti-federal sentiment supported by the xenophobic attitude of the people of Sabah is affecting the Federation of Malaysia. First, the federation became unstable since this sentiment could evoke regional nationalism and subsequently demand independence. Second, it created a tense relationship between the federal government and the state of Sabah. Third, this sentiment could tear down the federal system. Fourth, the spirit of patriotism and nationalism of the people of Sabah towards the Federation of Malaysia is fading. Fifth, this sentiment threatens the harmony and unity of the country as well as the stability of Malaysia as a federal state.

It can be assumed that the xenophobic and anti-federal attitude of the people of Sabah can threaten the survival of the federation. Hence, the government must take immediate actions to overcome this sentiment, which are discussed in the next section.

Actions to Overcome Xenophobia and Anti-Federal Sentiment

Xenophobia is a dangerous trait as it can trigger the birth of anti-federal sentiment in society. The results of past studies have shown that most political and societal conflicts started with the nature of xenophobia and hatred towards immigrants, which later become a catalyst to dissatisfaction with the central governments. This feeling of frustration will eventually create an anti-federal movement whose

ultimate goal is to gain independence and the right to self-government. Therefore, the government must immediately take actions to address it.

In the case of overcoming the problem in Sabah, the federal government has so far taken three important steps. First, establishing a security control force on the east coast of Sabah known as The Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) in 2013 to keep Sabah's land safe from being invaded and threatened by Filipino illegal immigrants. Second, creating a federal ministerial post to take care of Sabah and Sarawak affairs. Third, amending Article 1 (2) of the Federal Constitution to restore the original status of Sabah and Sarawak as territories equivalent in status to Malaya. However, the actions taken by the central government has not yet been able to alleviate the xenophobic and anti-federal attitude of the people of Sabah towards the federal government; therefore, the federal government needs to solve this problem by taking the following 10 steps.

First, the federal government must be fair in upholding the concept of federalism to all states in Malaysia as enshrined in the constitution. In the practice of federalism, states that are in the federation have their own jurisdiction to allow them to administer their jurisdiction. In the case of Sabah, the federal government must respect and implement MA63, which binds the establishment of Malaysia including a 20-point Agreement that underlies the agreement. This is because the survival of federalism in Malaysia depends on a thorough solution of xenophobia and anti-federal sentiment in Sabah.

Second, to reduce the spirit of regional nationalism, the federal government needs to give administrative autonomy in certain matters to Sabah. For example, the power to manage public transport and the environment can be delegated or at least shared between the federal and state government of Sabah so that the local community can participate in the decision-making process. Apart from that, decentralisation of powers can be done in the field of education, gas distribution as well as electricity and gas regulatory powers in Sabah, devolution of power to the Sabah courts, and the return of 50% of tourism tax collection to the state government. Tuanku Jaafar stated that the devolution of federal power to federal departments or agencies in Sabah is easy to implement since it only involves small administrative and financial powers (W. J. Tuanku Jaafar, personal communication, 6 January 2022).

Third, a large annual allocation must be provided to Sabah to reduce the state's poverty gap with other states in the federation. Fourth, the number of special grants under Article 112D of the Malaysian constitution to Sabah should be increased. Although a large annual development allocation has been given to Sabah, the amount is still inadequate to develop this vast state. Fifth, Sabah's economy must be improved by launching appropriate programs. Sixth,

discussions with the Sabah government should be held in addressing the demand for autonomy and matters that affect the federal government's relationship with Sabah. Seventh, Sabah should be given the right to autonomy as agreed in MA63. Eighth, discussions on raising oil royalties should be hastened.

Ninth, the main keys to eradicating xenophobia are unity, tolerance, and mutual respect. Unity must be forged from the grassroots level through education while emphasising the concept of unity between races. Children need to be educated to recognise and nurtured to live with other races so that they respect each other. Tenth, to foster national unity, the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* must be upheld. Malaysians need to stop labelling themselves as Sabahans, Sarawakians, or even Johorians. This is important to eliminate xenophobic sentiments and further increase the spirit of federalism among the people of this country. As long as the people love the country and stand firm with it, regional nationalism will not emerge, and the sovereignty of the Federation of Malaysia will not fade and remain preserved.

Conclusion

The nature of xenophobia and anti-federalism is very closely related to the issue of division of society and territory as well as the dissatisfaction of the people against the federal government that discriminates against them or deny their rights to autonomy as enshrined in the constitution. In the case of Sabah, results from the discussions have shown that xenophobia and anti-federal sentiments emerged from the disappointment of the people towards the privileges and promises in the MA63 and the 20-point Agreement that were not implemented. SSKM movement claimed that royalties and oil profits earned in Sabah were not enjoyed by the people of the state; this is the reason they hate the federal government which they consider as outsiders. Other factors causing xenophobia among the Sabahans towards the federal government include the following four things. First, they felt that the state of Sabah is very different from other states in the federation. Second, the inequality of treatment given by the federal government to the state of Sabah also led to the existence of anti-federal movements. Third, the state of Sabah is rich in oil and natural resources but saw backwardness of development compared to other states. Fourth, the incitement of the SSKM movement and anti-federal groups raised the nature of xenophobia and the spirit of self-determination among the people of Sabah.

Therefore, the xenophobic and anti-federal attitude led the people of Sabah to believe that by cultivating the spirit of state patriotism, the idea of self-administration and governance can be implemented. The above idea is very dangerous and can threaten the integrity of the Federation of Malaysia. In terms

of the danger of this sentiment, it has been revealed that the xenophobia of Sabahans only created an anti-federal movement and not self-determination to the point of breaking the federation.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for the generously sponsored research grants with the codes SK-2020- 005 and SK-2020-015. These research projects would not be able to take off without this assistance.

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How to cite this article (APA):

How to cite this article (APA):

Ismail, M. A. & Yusoff, M. A. (2022). Xenophobia and Anti-Federal Sentiment in Sabah and its Impact on Malaysian Federalism. *JATI-Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 27(1), 66-87

Date received: 11 March 2022

Date of acceptance: 1 June 2022