
**FROM PAROCHIALISM TO UNIVERSALISM:
A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF BAJAU SEMPORNA POLITICAL
CULTURE OF SABAH MALAYSIA**

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Abstract : In the context of the study of Sabah's political development, the contribution of Semporna and its community cannot be denied or dismissed. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to stated that Semporna has an interesting scientific dimension to be used as a corpus of knowledge in analyzing and digesting the political development of Sabah in general and Semporna in particular. Semporna in the geo-social context of Sabah is very synonymous with the Bajau community, the majority ethnic group that inhabits the area (Semporna). In the demographic context of Sabah, the Bajau community in Semporna is authoritatively known as "East Coast Bajau or Bajau Semporna". Based on field data collected semi-longitudinally (2018-2022), this article aims to analyze the political behavior of the Bajau Semporna community in a "parochial" cultural-political framework. Is the political culture still strong among the Bajau Semporna community? Is "parochial" political culture being the main basis in the process of making political decisions among Bajau-Semporna? To what extent does the modernization process affect or contest (contest) the "parochial" political culture? Based on the finding and data discussion, it is crystal clear that the premise underlies in this study suggest that modernization and socioeconomic development bring changes in values, norms and consciousness from parochialism to universal consciousness as per suggested by Robertson (1992), Giddens (1990) and Ohmae (1996).

Keywords: Modernization, Values, Political Behaviour, Political Development, GE15

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of the study of Sabah's political development, the contribution of Semporna and its community cannot be denied or dismissed. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to

stated that Semporna has an interesting scientific dimension to be used as a corpus of knowledge in analyzing and digesting the political development of Sabah in general and Semporna in particular (Doolittle, 2001; Osman, 2017). Semporna in the geo-social context of Sabah is very synonymous with the Bajau community, the majority ethnic group that inhabits the area (Semporna). In the socio demographic sense, the Bajau community in Semporna is authoritatively known as "East Coast Bajau or Bajau Semporna" (Brown & Warren, 1983).

Maps of Malaysia



Maps of Malaysia Showing Sabah State

Source: <http://wwwflowering.blogspot.com/2011/08/part-1-intro-to-tawau-sabah.html>



Maps of Sabah Showing the District of Semporna

Source: <http://wwwflowering.blogspot.com/2011/08/part-1-intro-to-tawau-sabah.html>

Meanwhile, in the geo-political context of Sabah, Semporna is an area known as a "Bajau political stronghold" for the state of Sabah (Hossin, 2018; Ismail, 2010; Sather, 2001). If we look at the development of Sabah politics starting from 1960 until now (2022), parties that were founded on the basis of "Parochial", often received a strong support and votes from the local community ("Chapter 13. Kota Marudu and Keningau, Sabah: Personality,

Patronage and Parochial Politics," 2018). For example, the United Sabah National Organization (USNO)---even though experienced a leadership crisis in 1975 & 1976 and later suffered a defeat in the Sabah State election in 1976---still received an overwhelming support and managed to secured seats in Semporna. During the era of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) administration (1985-1990), the PBS found it difficult to penetrate and secure a support from the Bajau Semporna community(Whelan, 1970). This situation (Parochialism), is often associated with the political culture of Bajau Semporna, often labeled as very "*exprit-de-corp*", that is "high sense of belonging" which is very strong among the community. Even in the context of the "everyday-defined", the impression or perception of the majority Sabahan towards the Bajau-Semporna community stands out to be an "extreme" image of "parochial & primordial". The victory of Warisan Political Party in the 14th General Election for the state of Sabah in 2018, particularly the untouchable and challenging victory of Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal in Semporna Parliamentary Constituent is strongly linked to the element of "*exprit-de-corp*" as mentioned above(Hashim et al., 2012).

Based on field data collected semi-longitudinally (2018-2022), this article aims to analyze the political behavior of the Bajau Semporna community in a "parochial" cultural-political framework. Is the political culture still strong among the Bajau Semporna community? Is "parochial" political culture being the main basis in the process of making political decisions among Bajau-Semporna? To what extent does the modernization process affect or contest (contest) the "parochial" political culture? This effort is made in line with the development of the current wave of globalization that is affecting the world community today. More interestingly, as emphasized by Robertson (1992), Giddens (1990) and Ohmae (1996), the current wave of globalization sweeping the world today not only contains universal values that transcend geopolitical boundaries, but also create what they called as world community's thinking across various sociocultural background.

METHOD

The study was conducted gradually between April 2018 up until December 2018 in Semporna Sabah Malaysia, then continue between July 2019 until its was force to stop on February 2020 when the Corona Virus Pandemic has reached Malaysia compound. The Movement Control Order (MCO) activate by the Malaysia authority has in one way another effected the fieldwork activities and scheduled in Semporna. However, the unexpected even of Sabah State Election in September 26, 2020, has gave us some room and space to continue our study and fieldwork until Malaysia state come into its 15 General Election on 19 November 2022.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Bajau Semporna Political Culture: Parochial or Universal?

Undeniably the Bajau Semporna community after the formation of Malaysia in September 16, 1963, especially its young generation, is already synonymous or symbiosis, in fact very much familiar with Western and Modernization philosophical thinking as their main socio-mechanism in achieving social development. For example, In the context of Bajau-Semporna, the philosophy of western modernization, was driven by local political leadership figures, as early as 1960s and 1970s, and then spread widely through educational process among and within the community until to date. It is not an exaggeration to state that Semporna after the formation of Malaysia has begun to be strongly bound to this philosophy. This can be witnessed especially since the mid-1990s, when most Malaysian modernization policies based on the free market, industrialization, privatization, Malaysia Incorporation, and corporatization had its "tangible" effect in the Semporna District (Interview with Abdullah, 2022).

As a result, the socio dichotomy of Bajau Semporna community also changed physically: They no longer physically lived on the island; there is migration on a significant scale from the Island to the Semporna Mainland. Although the process of industrialization, privatization and corporatization in Semporna exists in a "slow but impactful", it has indirectly produced a form of cross-culturally physical movement of Bajau-Semporna community. Strong evidence indicates that the Bajau-Semporna migration movement not only confined in Semporna main-land, but also beyond Sabah socio-political boundaries. This phenomenon has unknowingly expanded socio parameter of social interaction among the Bajau-Semporna itself (Interview with Hindi, 2022).

These changes, consciously or *vice-versa*, contribute towards the formation of a stable Bajau-Semporna middle class society that has its own pattern of values and norms. Studies of the middle class in Sabah so far have shown the same findings, namely that Sabah society today is a pluralistic group of middle-class people. From a sociological point of view, the formation of a middle-class society is not only a social indicator of economic development, but also abstractly a manifestation of the existence of values, norms and also a common world-view among the members of the society regardless of their primordial differences (Interview with Hamzah, 2022).

In relation to that, this article further examines the interaction of "parochial" political culture and universality (global awareness) based on empirical data collected since 2018 under the larger context on the continuous study of electoral process in Malaysia and Sabah state, *inter-alia*, the study of the 2022 Malaysia General Election (GE15); to gauge empirically what is the form and pattern of Bajau-Semporna political culture within the

broader context of Malaysia's political culture, *vis-à-vis*, new phase of Malaysia political development.

Parochial and Universality: Empirical Evidence of the Semporna GE15

Based on the questionnaire that was distributed to 2440 respondents, several questions that are closely related to aspects of national awareness were asked to the respondents. Among them are, first, the political party that will be their choice; and second, electoral issues that affect the political beliefs of respondents. As stated at the beginning of this article, the process of modernization and capitalist values have changed the form of consciousness (nationalism) among the many facets of Malaysia plural societies including the Bajau-Semporna of Sabah. The said premise coincides with the findings of the questionnaire which shows that universal issues appear as the main issue in determining which political party will be their preferred choice. Table 1 shows that 43.2% of respondents stated that they would vote a party that fights for the issue of universality. On the other hand, issues of group consciousness such as race, racial and even local or regional awareness remain firmly rooted in the intellectual minds of the Bajau-Semporna; however, those awareness (primordial sense) have begun to received gradual challenges by norms and awareness of universal consciousness.

TABLE 1

Political Party To Be Voted Based Issues Fought

Issues Political Party	Number of Respondents	% of Total Valid Compliance	% of Total Respondents
Universalism	1 038	43.2	42.5
Kaum/Nationalism	377	15.7	15.5
Race	385	16.0	15.8
Regionalism/Localisme	323	13.4	13.2
Not Sure	281	11.7	11.5
Number of Valid Insight	2 404	100.0	98.5
Compliance Dropped	36	-	1.5
Number of Respondents	2 440	-	100.0

Source: Questionnaire 2022.

The change in political behavior among respondents/voters is more pronounced and can be seen clearly in relation to the question underlying their political beliefs. From the statistical data collected and analysis on the said question, almost 72% of respondents/voter's plump for aspects of justice, transparency, freedom and accountability as the main social basis of their political beliefs. This finding is clearly in line with the attitude and behavior of respondents/voters who in favor of political parties that fight for the issue of universality. The change in the attitude and behavior of the

respondents/voters clearly reflects changes that parallel with the process of modernization through which majority of the Bajau-Semporna community has undergone even since the formation of Malaysia Federation.

TABLE 2

Issues of Justice, Transparency, Freedom, accountability influence political beliefs

YES/NO	Number	% Total Valid Compliance	% Total Respondents
YES	1 739	72.2	71.3
NO	668	27.8	27.4
Total Valid Compliance	2 407	100.0	98.6
Compliance Dropped	33	-	1.4
Total Respondents	2 440	-	100.0

Source: Questionnaire, 2022

This change in political behavior is clearly a form of behavior change that is 'genuine' and not a *cliché*. For example, regarding the issue of corruption, cronyism and nepotism, 61.5% of respondents/voters consciously feel that the said issue involves social values that are contrary to the aspects of good government and society that are fair, transparent and responsible (Table 3). Thus, the issue of the dismissal of Datuk Seri Saffiee Apdal (DSSA) from UMNO (United Malay National Organizations) is viewed in these contexts and was regards to be closely related as the main catalyst for change in the political behavior of the Bajau-Semporna community.

TABLE 3

Corruption, Cronism, Nepotism
PRU15

YES/NO	Number	% Total Valid Compliance	% Total Respondents
YES	1 469	61.5	60.2
NO	918	38.5	37.6
Number Valid Compliance	2 387	100.0	97.8
Compliance Dropped	53	-	2.2
Total Respondents	2 440	-	100.0

Source: Questionnaire 2022.

TABLE 4

Hot Issues Discussed in Constituents

Issues	Number	% Total Valid Compliance	% Total Respondents
Economic Crisis	537	22.4	22.0
Dismissal of DSSA	725	30.3	29.7
Religion	394	16.5	16.1
Political Stability	707	29.5	29.0
Election Process	32	1.3	1.3
Total Valid Compliance	2 395	100.0	98.2
Compliance Dropped	45	-	1.8
Total Respondents	2 440	-	100.0

Source: *Questionnaire 2022*.

However, as per-mentioned earlier, the elements that lead to change have been gradually embedded through the process of modernization and in lieu with socioeconomic development as well as the presence of new values amidst the process of globalization. To examine this thesis, a cross-examination analysis was done in relation to the focus question for the respondents/voters, namely 'Political Party to Be Voted'.

TABLE 5

Choice of Political Party According to Respondent's Age

Age	Party To Be Voted (Issues)					Total
	Universalism	Nationalism	Race	Local	Not Sure	
21-40	409	145	150	132	96	932
	<i>43.9</i>	<i>15.6</i>	<i>16.1</i>	<i>14.2</i>	<i>10.3</i>	<i>100.0</i>
41-55	471	189	165	154	115	1.094
	<i>43.1</i>	<i>17.3</i>	<i>15.1</i>	<i>14.1</i>	<i>10.5</i>	<i>100.0</i>
56 +	156	42	69	33	69	369
	<i>42.3</i>	<i>11.4</i>	<i>18.7</i>	<i>8.9</i>	<i>18.7</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Overall	1,036	376	384	319	280	2.395
	<i>43.3</i>	<i>15.7</i>	<i>16.0</i>	<i>13.3</i>	<i>11.7</i>	<i>100.0</i>

numbers in italics are percentages of the total

Source: *Questionnaire 2022*.

Table 5 shows that political parties that fight for the issue of universality become the main choice with a uniform percentage for each age category. This reflects that universal issues have taken place in the political calculations of all age groups of voters in Semporna. This study also shows that the political awareness and change in the political behavior of the

Bajau-Semporna community is comprehensive, that is across the age group of 21 years and above. Likewise, on the categories of men and women, this study once again shows that both groups, choose political parties that fight for the issue of universality as their preferred choice (Table 6). Among the reasons that contribute towards this change is the modern education system and the development of information telecommunications technology found in Semporna itself. The question that arises is to what extent the issue of universality that is across age groups can be linked to the process of globalization? However, it has become clear to us that today's telecommunication technology is so advanced compared to two decades ago. Universal values and aspirations that come with the globalization process have been accelerated by the current technological advancement and have 'captured' all corners of the region and district in Semporna. The findings of this study also show that the issue of universality cuts across and transcends urban and rural strata. Table 7 shows that overall, political parties that fight for the issue of universalism are the main choice (43.2%) followed by race issues (16.0%), nationalism (15.7%), and local/regional issues (13.4%).

TABLE 6

Preferred Political Party Based on SEX Group

Age	Party To Be Voted (Issues)					Total
	Universalism	Nationalism	Race	Local	Not Sure	
Male	742	282	252	277	189	1 742
	<i>42.6</i>	<i>16.2</i>	<i>14.5</i>	<i>15.9</i>	<i>10.8</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Female	296	95	133	46	92	662
	<i>44.7</i>	<i>14.4</i>	<i>20.1</i>	<i>6.9</i>	<i>13.9</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Total	1 036	377	385	323	281	2 404
	<i>43.2</i>	<i>15.7</i>	<i>16.0</i>	<i>13.4</i>	<i>11.7</i>	<i>110.0</i>

numbers in italics are percentages of the total

Source: Questionnaire 2022.

TABLE 7

Preferred Political Party Based on Urban & Rural Status

Status	Party To Be Voted (Issues)					Total
	Universalism	Nationalism	Race	Local	Not Sure	
Urban	617	221	218	180	184	1 420
	<i>43.5</i>	<i>15.6</i>	<i>15.4</i>	<i>12.7</i>	<i>13.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Rural	421	156	167	143	97	984
	<i>42.8</i>	<i>15.9</i>	<i>17.0</i>	<i>14.5</i>	<i>9.9</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Total	1 038	377	385	323	281	2 404
	<i>43.2</i>	<i>15.7</i>	<i>16.0</i>	<i>13.4</i>	<i>11.7</i>	<i>110.0</i>

numbers in italics are percentages of the total

Source: Questionnaire 2022.

However, one of the aspects that can be classified as an interesting finding is on the issue of nationalism. The findings show that there is no significant difference between urban and rural areas on the issue of nationalism, on the contrary, race issues and local/regional issues receive more attention in rural areas. This means that even though the issue of universality affects the voting pattern, there is a strong tendency outside the city (Rural Areas) that race and local issues are still dominance and as compare to the urban areas. In other words, the situation reflects the dialectical nature of the universalization process itself, in which the elements of universality also invite resistance from the local. What can be explained is that even though the current wave of universality rise rapidly with the spread of information and universal aspirations is fast contagious, reaching and permeating throughout Semporna district, there is a belief, especially in the Islanders of Semporna, that the interests and integrity of the nation and the locality must be defended. However, it should be emphasized that with almost the same percentage of respondents who choose a party that fights for universal issues; the distinction between urban and rural has become fussy. A clear conclusion from the said data analysis is that educational level is aligned with universality issue (Table 8).

TABLE 8

Preferred Political Party Based on Education Background

Education	Party To Be Voted (Issues)					Total
	Universalism	Nationalism	Race	Local	Not Sure	
Primary	235	71	99	119	81	605
	<i>38.8</i>	<i>11.7</i>	<i>16.4</i>	<i>19.7</i>	<i>13.4</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Secondary	607	239	224	163	129	1 362
	<i>44.6</i>	<i>17.5</i>	<i>16.4</i>	<i>12.0</i>	<i>9.5</i>	<i>100.0</i>
University	169	56	37	22	17	301
	<i>56.1</i>	<i>18.6</i>	<i>12.3</i>	<i>7.3</i>	<i>5.6</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Unofficially	26	11	24	16	53	130
Educated	<i>20.0</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>18.5</i>	<i>12.3</i>	<i>40.8</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Total	1 037	377	384	320	280	2 398
	<i>43.2</i>	<i>15.7</i>	<i>16.0</i>	<i>13.3</i>	<i>11.7</i>	<i>100.0</i>

numbers in italics are percentages of the total.

Source: questionnaire 2022

It is interesting to highlight that research on other issues also supports the above conclusions. In other words, level of education received by an individual will definitely change a person's behavior towards he/her traditional values or system. The evidence is clear in Table 8, that strongly suggest and shows to us the symbiosis relation between level of education and the issue of universality, and vice-versa the issue of nationalism, which is also positively related to the level of education. The opposite situation occurs regarding race and local/regional issues. This finding indirectly supports the premise that underlies the discussion in this article that modernization and socioeconomic development bring changes in values, norms and consciousness from parochialism to universal consciousness.

CONCLUSION

The discussion in this article attempts to establish the premises that Semporna and its community members (Bajau) are part of the Malaysian social system as a whole. Logically, whatever the development project taking place (be it from political, economic or social aspects) at the national and global level, it also affects the system, thinking, values and norms of Semporna society. In this regard, the process of globalization has had a direct impact on the form and nature of Semporna society's thinking—specifically "parochialism"—and led to the emergence of a form of political culture that contains thoughts and values that go beyond the limits of parochialism, namely universal consciousness. This universal awareness 'budded' and 'bloomed' in parallel with the formation of the middle class in Semporna as a result of the modernization process especially through the rapid industrialization developed by the government.

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