

RURAL DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNITARIAN CLIENTELISM: A STUDY IN SIK, KEDAH, POST-STATE ELECTIONS 2023

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ABSTRACT

This article challenges the assumption that once democracy is established in a state, it adheres to liberal democratic mechanisms. In contentious rural areas of Malaysia, such as Sik, unique factors, including communal politics, grassroots education, and community engagement, play a significant role. This study analyses why certain figures, such as Kedah Chief Minister, Dato' Seri Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, gain popularity despite insufficient explanation by existing theories. Based on original data from in-depth interviews with local political leaders and participant observation, this article explores the factors influencing voting patterns in Sik and their implications for the wider Kedah region during the 2023 Malaysian State Elections. It applies the political concept of 'clientelism' as found in previous research and incorporating a communitarian dimension, leading to the proposition of 'communitarian clientelism' to better understand diverse democratic practices.

Keywords: Malaysia, clientelism, community, democracy, elections

INTRODUCTION

The rural district of Sik, located in the state of Kedah, is primarily an agricultural region. Official data states that the population of Sik stands at 71,261, with an active voting population of 63,126 (Pihak Berkuasa Tempatan Negeri Kedah Darul Aman 2024). Following the new inclusion of young voters aged 18 and above in the wake of the 2022 General Elections, the voter population in Sik has increased by 6.6% from 59,183 to 63,126 (SPR 2024a). This increase in the influx of new voters, coupled with the information-disseminating power of new social media platforms, has contributed to a new trend in Malaysian voter preferences (Ong 2023, 6–8; Azmil 2023, 8).

As a district with a large majority of its population involved in agricultural-based economic activities, Sik, like any other rural constituencies in Malaysia, was relatively unknown in the Malaysian political map, at least before 17th May 2020 when its native, Dato' Seri Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor (hereinafter referred to as Sanusi) rose to power as the 14th Chief Minister of Kedah. Sanusi, who originally hailed from a family of rice farmers and rubber tappers, succeeded in creating an aura of personality that has influenced national-level political discussions through his style of 'carefree' and seemingly 'no holds barred' rhetoric on the political podium. This sudden rise in national popularity has prompted some pundits to equate him with figures like Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte (Leong 2023, 5). Due in part to the post-2020 rise in popularity of Sanusi, the district has attracted considerable attention in national political discussions.

In addition, there are other political factors that make Sik a location that deserves deeper political analysis. The population in the district changed their political loyalty in every election for about 25 years. The term 'political loyalty' is defined as preference for a certain political party during elections, and to illustrate the changing sentiment, the data of winning parties since the year 1986 is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Winning candidates for the P013 Sik parliamentary seat

General election year Seat: P013 Sik	Winning candidate	Party
1986 (seat first created)	Zainol Abidin Johari	Barisan Nasional (BN)
1990	Abdul Hamid Othman	BN
1995	Abdul Hamid Othman	BN
1999	Shahnon Ahmad	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS)
2004	Wan Azmi Wan Ariffin	BN
2008	Che Uda Che Nik	PAS
2013	Mansor Abd Rahman	BN
2018	Ahmad Tarmizi Sulaiman	PAS
2022	Ahmad Tarmizi Sulaiman	PAS

Based on the data outlining the election results of the Parliamentary seat of Sik and adding together the landslide victory of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) in the two state seats that made up the Parliamentary seat, namely the N23 Belantik and N24 Jeneri seats, in the state elections in August 2023, it could be generalised that the PAS political achievements in the district has

been solidified—moving from strength to strength. This article focuses on the contributions of actions and small-scale programmes implemented by the local party machinery, which are largely embedded in religious, educational, and community programmes that contribute to this development.

The specific questions that this article wishes to answer are: (1) What was the underlying societal factor that propelled the winning parties to achieve their goals during the recent General Elections and State Elections in Sik?; and (2) How do local political actors and leaders understand the democratic dynamics in the district? Most analyses boil down their explanations of the electoral trend simply in the form of an almost zero-sum game between PAS and United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) (i.e., UMNO losing support, therefore PAS gains) (Welsh 2023), the rhetoric of the so-called ‘green wave’ underscored by racial and religious appeal (Azmil 2023), and the unhappiness of the electorate towards the seriousness of the Anwar Ibrahim-led government in governance issues (Abdul Rashid 2023). However, I would argue that the operations of PAS in Sik are richer than that—it does not operate solely as a political party proper but represents an effect of a deliberate long-term effort of building trust within the society characterised by interpersonal relationships and cultural production involving the dynamics of personal values present in that society.

The operations of the two largest and most visible political parties in Sik, namely PAS and UMNO, are closely related and inextricably tied to the cultural nexus of the rural population in that area. Having said that, political manoeuvring by both players in this duopolistic competition should be seen as more than a normal process of getting votes whenever an election comes. Party politics is embedded within the local culture, invisibly present beneath the veneer of the sacred and profane lives of the populace. Data collection on this interconnected nexus of culture and politics among different political parties in Sik, and on the view that election outcomes are primarily an expression of that process (Khairy and Shahril 2023), were done using several methodologies.

First, in-depth interviews were conducted in August 2023 and October 2023 with local leaders of various political parties that are currently active in Sik at the time of writing. The interview was held just two weeks after the state elections, so these political leaders could provide fresh information on their local campaigning strategies. To help compare and contrast the experiences of the different components of the respective political parties, in-depth interviews were conducted with women leaders from the parties. The individual participants of the interviews with their political party credentials are listed as follows:

Table 2: List of interview participants

Participant	Post, party, and activities
Ustazah Norhasimah Abdul Rahman	Chief, Dewan Muslimat PAS Sik; Treasurer, Dewan Muslimat PAS Kedah.
Ustazah Saemah Abdul Rahman	Deputy Chief, Dewan Muslimat PAS Sik.
Mazli Saipi	Chief, Wanita Parti Amanah Negara Sik; contested for the Belantik state seat in State Elections 2023 and lost.
Maizatul Akmam Osman	Chief, Wanita UMNO Sik; contested for P013 Sik Parliamentary seat in General Elections 2022 and lost.
Muhammad Ismadi Abdul Kadir	Chief, Parti Peribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU) Sik; Special Officer to the Chief Minister of Kedah.
Mohd Shahiful Md Nasir	Chief, Dewan Pemuda PAS Sik (on leave since November 2022 due to remarks about 'going to hell for not supporting PAS' during the GE 2022 campaign).
Mohd Khizri Abu Kasim	Chief, UMNO Sik; contested against Sanusi for the N24 Jeneri state seat in the State Elections 2023 and lost.

By obtaining data from leaders across both traditional genders—men and women—of rival political parties competing in the same electorate, we hope to gain a more holistic view of the situation from the perspective of the political players themselves. Interview data have been coded at both the primary and secondary levels, and these codes have informed the analysis in this article. Simultaneously, since some political parties such as PAS base their movements on party ideology, strategies of community engagement and party recruitment must be understood in terms of their ideological bases, namely the sources, syllabus, and processes of ideology formation. Some relevant data from sources of PAS's ideology have been referred to as the context that became the basis of party mobilisation.

Secondly, to corroborate the findings from interview data, participant observations were conducted in several community hotspots in Sik during the two-week period before the 2023 state election and the two weeks after. Observations were conducted by participating in rallies of different parties and by visiting their information centres scattered around the district in the days leading up to election day. Additional observations were conducted in Sik in April-May 2024, especially during the Hari Raya Aidilfitri holiday period. Social events by different political parties in conjunction with the celebration were observed to connect the social aspect of party activities with their political

appeal among the masses. This article aims to provide an observation of the on-the-ground political culture of Sik populations living in various rural settings. As such, a richer picture of the populace's political decision-making process, partly influenced by political party activities, can be observed and characterised.

Current Explanations of Electoral Trends

Due to the relatively enormous success of the Perikatan Nasional coalition, it has become almost a mainstream explanation that Malay-Muslim voters are becoming more consolidated, akin to an *en bloc* voting behaviour. Experts have called this phenomenon using names such as the 'Green Wave' (Aznil 2023). This phenomenon is marked by trends such as a desire for a predominantly Malay-Muslim leadership, a dissatisfaction with the perceived incompetencies of the federal government in relation to 'defending Islam,' and an alleged prejudice towards the non-Malay leaders. In short, it assumes a certain form of national imagination (or imaginations) that should be in place in Malaysia, and this ideal has been distorted by the current administration's political leadership. Hence, it is imperative for the voters to vote for a realisation of these national imaginations; however, unclear or far from consistent they are.

However, the assumption of this *en bloc* behaviour among the Malay-Muslim population needs to be further considered, especially in light of differences in demographic settings, economic activities, and political expectations on the ground. In states where the Malay-Muslim population forms a majority, such as Kedah and Kelantan, and in Terengganu, where PN won all seats with no opposition (SPR 2024b), it would be natural to assume a similar motivation across these different electoral regions. However, unless an on-the-ground observation is conducted, the specific reasons for voting cannot be identified. Using the case of Sik, this article argues that the 'Green Wave' phenomenon, although it can be a suitable term to generalise a voting trend, is still insufficient as an explanatory device. The voting motivations are varied, and in many cases, are tied to rural communal culture.

Besides, there are current explanations that are based on an individual politician's reputation. For example, the clout and popularity surrounding Sanusi and his exchanging fire with the top guns in Anwar's administration, such as Saifuddin Nasution, the Minister of Home Affairs, and Rafizi Ramli, the Minister of Economy, through his social media posts and during the election campaign speeches added to his image of a 'fighter' that speaks for the 'common people.' Not only that, Sanusi's image of a courageous leader was further strengthened when he engaged in a social media exchange with Tengku Ismail Ibrahim, the Regent of Johor over issues concerning the management of national and state football teams on social media. Even though these exchanges are not strictly related to state politics, it managed to construct a desired image of Sanusi as a

leader of the common folks, not of the ‘elites.’ In addition, one can see a parallel with the discourse of populism here, when Sanusi is projecting himself as equal with the people and antagonistic towards ‘the elites’ through his activities in villages displayed on his social media accounts (Müller 2013). For example, on 6th December 2022, his official Facebook account posted a picture of him in the paddy field, or on 5th September 2022, he posted a photo of himself harvesting *petai*; and on 8th December 2021, he posted a picture of his lunch, which was a plate of rice, fried eggs, salted fish, and soy sauce.

In addition, unpopular policies that have been instituted by Anwar’s administration caused justifiable dissatisfaction among the voters. On social media such as TikTok, videos of Anwar’s political speech from past elections that promised to reduce petrol prices as soon as he becomes the Prime Minister circulated widely, thus making the reputation of his administration among the local people in Sik to be compromised for the worse as *tidak menepati janji* (never fulfilled his promises). Overall, current analysis of trends pointed towards the Malay-Muslim voting trend as almost an *en bloc* behaviour due to their dissatisfaction with how the government handled issues concerning religion and race and individual popularity factors.

Based on the in-depth interviews, although both of the aforementioned factors emerged as explanations for the voting trends in Sik, other, more structurally and locally entrenched factors could upend UMNO’s grip in Sik, resulting in a locality with PAS as the more dominant local political force. As shown in Table 1, the area was previously volatile, with PAS and UMNO competing for dominance, but it gradually gravitated towards PAS in the wake of the 2018 elections and has continued to do so since then. To explain the mechanism of cause and effect behind PAS gaining a stronger foothold in Sik in a gradual manner, explanations that hinge on individual popularity and *en bloc* voting behaviour are insufficient.

In the case of PAS in Sik, there are at least three important aspects of merging the social fabric with party politics. First, community-based activities that are non-political but managed to assist the party in their campaigning and recruitment processes. Secondly, non-political youth activities geared towards building rapport among the youth; and finally, the utilisation of local organic institutions of society, such as religious and educational institutions. PAS’s long-term strategies that strengthened their foothold in Sik can be understood through these aspects.

To analyse these strategies, this article proposes the concept of ‘communitarian clientelism’, which extends Weiss’s (2020; 2022) notion of clientelism as a demand-and-supply function in Malaysian politics. While clientelism generally refers to the relationship between clients and suppliers in terms of material goods and services, it can be expanded to incorporate a communitarian

dimension when the defining factor lies in distinct community needs that are not necessarily material or financial in nature.

Clientelism and Its Communitarian Manifestation

Generally, the literature surrounding clientelism is based on the premise that there are transactional exchanges involving a dyad of client-patron relationships. As indicated in Scott's (1972) classic writings on clientelist politics in Southeast Asia, political patrons will supply the necessities, and, through various social forces, clients will provide the required political support (Hicken 2011).

While acknowledging the concept of 'money politics' within the ambit of clientelism is 'conceptually hazy', Weiss (2016) further classified types of clientelist politics in Malaysia into 'microparticularistic patronage' and 'mesoparticularistic club goods', which respectively refer to provision of specific individual needs and embarking on development projects in a community. For Dettman and Weiss (2018), these provisions refer to a combination of programmatic promises and ideological messaging that distribute costs and benefits among the citizens.

Weiss (2020) commented further that clientelistic relationships enforce performance legitimacy, even generating a moral obligation to reciprocity and not just limited to instrumental functions of politics. One example of a programmatic clientelist programme is the 1Malaysia project, and at the societal level, the activities of Muslimat PAS, such as house-to-house visits during elections.

Weiss's (2020) analysis of clientelism is further deepened through how the clientelist networks between different political parties constitute a complex of 'competitive electoral authoritarian' system done through fiscal patronage and affective ties, where the resources can be material, ideological, moral persuasion, and social connections. Especially after the 2008 General Elections, the competing parties in Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) sought to present themselves as the 'better provider' to their clients. In a more general sense, Ufen (2012; 2020) compared clientelistic competition involving material resources provided by UMNO with that involving more ideological resources provided by PAS.

Most arguments centring around Malaysian clientelist politics centre around a relationship of 'exchanges' between favours—benefits for votes. Exchanges are often linear, with one party giving and the other receiving, and there is reciprocity (Ravanella, Haim and Hicken 2022; Hicken et al. 2022). However, rural politics in many parts of Malaysia would require further explanations, especially the logic of value between societal activities and political establishments.

As a political theory, communitarianism refers to a concept in which the system of values is defined and understood differently in relation to communities (Bell 2024). Following these systems of values, clientelist connections can be imagined differently than an exchange of favours. Exchanges can occur without necessarily involving any foreseeable benefits to the participants because the value system makes participation palatable (Walzer 1990).

Hence, Walzer's (1983) analyses of communitarian political values are important because they hinge on how value systems are constructed. According to Enke (2020), voting can be viewed as a way to protect communal values in the United States. In observing PAS's growing influence in Sik, the appeal to communal values is apparent, given the political strategies at play.

As a concept, communitarian clientelism can be used to further analyse the relationship between the demand and supply of political support in the context of Sik, which combines clientelist relations with a communitarian understanding of values.

PAS's Long-Term Strategies

Enormous grassroots activists from all walks of life accompany old, broad-based political parties such as PAS. Such is the privilege enjoyed by another old political party too—UMNO. These activists are mostly not officially party members, but they are actively involved in their activities and even assist the respective parties' campaigns. PAS, for instance, has always boasted itself as a party that is being supported by volunteers as their main workers, with the oft-repeated mantra 'the money for the political work of the party is in the pockets of the party members and volunteers.'

Besides, the non-political activities conducted by PAS youth, in some respects, managed to attract support from younger voters. For example, sports tournaments and motorcycle-riding convoys led by PAS leaders, coupled with the optics of Sanusi as an amateur all-rounder sportsman, have affected how the youth view him as a person and a politician. During the campaign events for the State Elections 2023, PAS in Sik organised friendly football matches targeted at youths from different villages. Outside the football teams themselves, many attended just to be spectators, specifically to witness Sanusi as one of the players in the games (Participant 1, 2023).

More importantly, such community activities are not limited to the election season. Sports tournaments organised by PAS are an annual fare in the district. According to PAS youth leaders themselves, these activities are an indispensable effort to 'be close' to their target population. In the words of Mohd Shahiful Md Nasir, the chief of Pemuda PAS Kawasan Sik:

We do activities that are loved by the youths, and we don't talk about politics when we are doing it. For example, we organise sports tournaments, and through that tournament, we could get to know each other better. When they join in our activities and they see us with them doing things they like, they will feel more belonged; they will see that we are with them always.

Shahiful, a full-time pharmacist at Klinik Kesehatan Sik credits the consistent community activities by the different wings of the party, such as the Youth and Women's wings, as the cause for why the local community in the district supports the party.

For many rural folks in Sik, community programmes associated with religious institutions such as mosques and *menaksah* (or *surau*, typically smaller than mosques and usually does not hold Friday prayers) are integral to the fabric of everyday life. There, the distinction between the sacred and the profane blurs, and in the space and moment of these programmes, community members could alternate between the sacred world of religion and the profane world of community activities almost seamlessly. In Sik, some mosques and *menaksah* are unofficially associated with political parties—with some led by PAS members and others by UMNO members (Participant 2, 2023).

In carrying out activities associated with religious institutions, such as funeral rites for locals, weekly Friday prayers, Hari Raya prayers and gatherings, *korban* ceremonies (animal sacrifice during the Eid al-Adha celebration), and so on, locals could talk to each other and build personal-level communal bonds with the institution's leaders. "In the days leading up to the SE 2023, I observed talks among the locals that UMNO leaders seldom see them in the villages, but PAS leaders, even though they lost the previous elections, are always seen among the local community" (Participant 3, 2023). A survey of Sanusi's social media accounts showed that he tried to construct a public image of himself as always physically 'present' with the people.

Through small steps aimed at building interpersonal relationships with the local community, the successes PAS currently enjoys in Sik are significantly due to the efficacy of its long-term strategies. By combining different types of community organisation strategies aimed at different levels of society, they improve their chances of being seen not as a mere 'political party,' but a vehicle for social connection, welfare, and cohesion. Due to the trust and support built among the locals, PAS has slowly mobilised its various components to ensure that welfare provisions are not limited to election times. In Sik, parties that function as 'welfare providers' beyond physical welfare, specifically involving social connections and communal togetherness, will have a higher chance of getting votes (Dettman and Weiss 2018).

However, in a larger context of rural Malaysia, the connection between parties as welfare providers and their support levels is more nuanced. Between 2004 and 2023, support for PAS in the state of Kelantan has improved and remains strong. In the neighbouring state of Terengganu, PAS managed to wrest the state in the 2018 elections, and support for the party has only improved since, evidenced by the PN coalition's total win of all Parliamentary seats in the 2022 election and all state assembly seats in 2023 (SPR 2025). PAS was not in the Federal Government for the most part in this period (excepting 2020–2022), and the federal administration announced many projects and development initiatives to woo the locals but ultimately failed.

Hence, an explanation beyond the material-based welfare connections is needed. Mutual connections between parties and society should be analysed beyond give-and-take politics. They are embedded in a complex of values and how society understands them. Most evidently, in all developmental measures, Kelantan has remained stagnant (Department of Statistics 2025), but the support for PAS is as strong as ever (see Appendix). In Kelantan, a similar configuration of rural activities has been in place across many localities, leading locals to identify PAS as the only legitimate choice within their value system. Part of the reason for this trend is weekly religious activities, such as the Medan Ilmu Lecture in Kota Bharu every Friday morning, and other smaller-scale gatherings of local activities that combine the sacred and profane fabrics of social life, organised by PAS.

In Terengganu, the Friday morning lecture at Masjid Rusila by Abdul Hadi Awang, which has been going on for more than 40 years without fail, has managed to create a significant 'third space' (Oldenburg 2013) among rural Muslim communities in their complex of social values. Add this to the organic connectedness of PAS machinery within local day-to-day institutions, and the political party stops being merely a political party but becomes a maintainer and producer of societal values.

Women Religious Politics

As PAS's women's wing, the Dewan Muslimat has been one of the most active Muslim political movements in Malaysia. Many of their modus operandi are kept 'hidden' behind the spotlight, utilising organically recruited unpaid local women's activists through various small-scale community-based activities (Kloos 2020). All these activities are done in a systematic way and are frequently passed as non-political and local-based religious activities in many observations. Therefore, it is important to explore how seemingly personal and non-political activities of local Muslim women could assist political objectives in the long term.

According to Ustazah Norhashimah, the Dewan Muslimat in Sik has been focusing on small-scale mobilisations since their establishment in the district in 1997. Their activities of attracting political support, party recruitment, and small-scale dissemination of Islamic political ideals do not exist independently of each other. They are characterised by specific *modus operandi*, syllabus and methods of religious interpretations, and ideas about *dakwah* (religious propagation) that could be located within a broader context of the Islamist mobilisation strategies (Farish 2016; Abdul Hadi 2020).

In Peninsular Malaysia, rural women's politics have always been the battleground between two biggest Malay political parties—Wanita UMNO/Puteri UMNO versus the Dewan Muslimat PAS. The Dewan Muslimat is present in almost all Malay-majority localities in the country (Zaireeni 2016). Aside from being an avenue for women's political participation, Dewan Muslimat is responsible for recruiting women to support the party through various *modus operandi*, including *usrah*, women's education, community programmes, and so on. In a similar vein, their arch-rivals, namely Wanita and Puteri UMNO, are also using similar methods; in Sik's case, their appeal is increasingly lacklustre. The answer to how PAS women could overtake UMNO women in political appeal could partly explain PAS's increasingly strong foothold in Sik.

Local- and small-scale activities of the Dewan Muslimat can be classified into two categories: the *usrah* system and community-based religious activities involving women and youth. Through these programmes, a longer-lasting bond with the local community, in the name of community service and religion, could be forged, akin to familial ties beyond forms of reciprocal loyalty in the context of electoral politics (McLaughlin 2015).

Usrah and local activities

The *usrah* is a hallmark of many modern Islamist movements in terms of recruitment and ideological alignment. Derived from the Arabic, the terminology speaks to its Middle Eastern origins. Modern implementation of the *usrah* system among Malaysian Islamist groups, i.e., not limited to PAS alone, is a local adaptation of the practice of the Muslim Brotherhood as outlined by its founder, Hasan al-Banna in his famous *Uṣūl al-ʿIshrīn* (The Twenty Basic Ideas), *Majmūʿat al-Rasāʾil* (Collection of Epistles), and others. In Malaysia, the *usrah* has been adapted according to the local context as expounded by prominent Islamist leaders such as Saari Sungib, Abdul Hadi Awang, and Abdullah Zaik Abd Rahman.

Generally, the *usrah* involves study groups meeting regularly, usually weekly. They are led by a *naqīb* (leader) appointed by the party. Among university students, selecting members for the *usrah* typically involves specific strategies

led by campus party leaders (*tanẓīm*). However, in the rural context, it will usually be predicated on community socio-religious activities. There are three general levels of *usrah* in the standard operation of PAS, namely *ta'rif* (introduction), *takwīn* (moulding), and *tanfīdh* (implementation). Every level has its own dedicated syllabus and guidebooks published by the party headquarters, and the final objective expected of members joining the highest level of *tanfīdh* is to work for the party in their own personal capacities (Lajnah Tarbiyah dan Perkaderan PAS Pusat 2018).

Usrah is standard practice at all levels, from kindergarten and school levels up to the top brass of the party. Regarding the syllabus, the standard would be works by Fathi Yakan, Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, Abdul Hadi Awang, and other well-known figures, with varying intensities according to participant levels. For example, school-level *usrah* might only discuss the beginning parts of Fathi Yakan's *Mā Dhā Ya'nī Intimā' li'l-Islām* (What does it mean to embrace Islam?), but for university students, several books are used simultaneously.

Among the uninitiated who are still not familiar with the party's ideology and Islamism in general, the beginner level of *ta'rif* will primarily focus on the basic ideas of Islam (understanding the five pillars of Islam and the six pillars of faith, improving personal piety, and emphasising service to society). Upon completing the first level, they will progress to the intermediate level of *takwīn* and finally the advanced level of *tanfīdh*. Here, the participants will be invited to ritually join the party through performing the *bay'ah* (pledge) in front of a representative of the party leadership (Lajnah Tarbiyah dan Perkaderan PAS Pusat 2018).

The Dewan Muslimat's local-based recruitment practices fall under the level of *ta'rif*, since the majority of participants are still unfamiliar with the *usrah* system and its accompanying ideology. Through community programmes such as small-scale *kenduri* (feasts) held at any house in the village, the Dewan Muslimat can foster bonds of piety with local women. A well-loved local *ustazah* (female Islamic teacher) will give short sermons on topics unrelated to partisan politics, focusing instead on the importance of remembering God and following the precepts of the religion.

In rural Malay communities, communal gatherings involving food, short sermons, and remembrance of God are vital. It ranges from the usual *kenduri doa selamat* (feast to supplicate for prosperity) after *isyak* prayers at individual houses, to *kenduri aqiqah* (feast to celebrate a newborn baby), *kenduri arwah* (feast to pray for the deceased), and the management of *kenduri kahwin* (wedding ceremony). As for the *kenduri kahwin*, the common utensils for cooking, tents, chairs and tables for guests are usually borrowed from the local UMNO or PAS offices (Participant 3, 2023; Participant 4, 2024). It is the organic interweaving of political movements and the everyday sacred-profane fabric of

the community's lives that makes the configuration of rural politics different, at least when compared to the comparatively policy-based politics in the urban seats.

Within PAS mobilisation strategies, *usrah* is always a calculated and consistent move beyond 'touch-and-go' community activities. In addition to serving recruitment objectives, it is also a tool to be close to the local community. Furthermore, the funding will almost always come from party members' coffers. According to Ustazah Saemah Abdul Rahman:

The strength of PAS lies in the *tarbiyyah* (education) and the *usrah*. When we conduct *usrah*, we are giving *tarbiyyah* to the listeners, and that is how our members expand. From just a small number of branches, now Dewan Muslimat could expand into a lot more branches. Now we have more than 70 branches in Sik alone...[sic] in the *usrah*, our focus is personal improvement and to be close to the community in the village. All our members started with *usrah*, and now we are reaping the sweetness [emphasis mine] when many of them assist our campaigns.

Then, Ustazah Norhasimah Abdul Rahman added thus:

For the older generation, the *usrah* usually involves [reciting *Surah*] *Yasin*, but now, we have specific syllabus to use...[sic] Our local *usrah* are encouraged to be done through a house-to-house method. More people can come compared to if we hold them at our *markaz* (party activity centre). In houses, we can hold feasts and eat together.

Even though PAS did not have a clear prospect of winning elections back in 1997, when they first established Dewan Muslimat in Sik, they already had a long-term objective through the inculcation of ideas and the cultivation of interpersonal relationships with the locals. These are recurring themes throughout interviews, not only with the two leaders of Dewan Muslimat in Sik, but also with Pemuda PAS, that they began in the 1990's without an objective of winning in the short run. They aimed to build rapport with the locals first. As a consequence, the party machinery operated seamlessly alongside society's day-to-day consciousness.

Despite slim chances of winning elections in the 1990's, their prime motivation is religious, as corroborated by women chiefs of UMNO and Amanah, their rivals. Maizatul Akmal Osman, the Wanita UMNO Chief mentioned, "how religious issues are being utilised to bolster the support [for PAS]. Some people are attracted to PAS due to their religious motivations and orientations". Simultaneously, Mazli Saipi, the Chief of Wanita Amanah Sik, lamented that "PAS has created a sentiment that they are synonymous with religion, and it is hard for us to break that among the locals".

In retrospect, usage of religious discourses associated with PAS might be taken too far, exemplified by the viral comments made by Mohd Shahiful on 10th November 2022 that got viral on cyberspace, when he mentioned that those who voted against PAS will 'go to hellfire'. Mohd Khizri Abu Kasim, the Chief of UMNO in Sik, expressed his concern that this symptom is not a new phenomenon.

This way of thinking is not new. It started in kindergarten, this kind of doctrine. They [PAS] have schools such as PASTI, SRITI, and so on. If you look closely, you will know that they have planted this kind of doctrine in the past 40 years. When you grow up with that idea repeated all over again, you'll only think in that way about religion and politics.

In a nutshell, PAS's local activities are successful in influencing community sentiment. Through house-to-house activities and community bonding, PAS women could then forge a communal bond with their electorates, primarily consisting of women. This strategy is used to garner support from children, siblings, and their husbands. Of course, the success rate could not be guaranteed, but it merits consideration that communal bonds could be translated into political support.

Local programmes involving women, the youth, and the elderly

In collaboration with other group of PAS-affiliated institutions such as the Pusat Asuhan Tunas Islam (PASTI), a PAS-run kindergarten widely spread across Peninsular Malaysia, Dewan Muslimat and Dewan Pemuda PAS could expand their access to women and children. For example, the Dewan Muslimat holds programmes such as sports and recreation involving families of the local communities. Plus, the Dewan Pemuda will then corroborate this effort through holding youth-friendly activities such as motorbike rides, which appeal to the youth. Sanusi's former Political Secretary, now MP for Alor Star, Afnan Hamimi, and Nurul Amin Hamid (MP for Padang Terap) are actively involved in leading and organising nationwide youth motorbike rides. PAS saw an opportunity to recruit youngsters following the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 years old in 2021 (Parliament of Malaysia 2019), and they grabbed it.

Plus, the Dewan Muslimat are active in carrying out activities targeted at youngsters. According to Ustazah Norhasimah:

For the youth, we have activities under our subsidiaries like Ameerah [youth wing of Dewan Muslimat]. For them, we don't do traditional *usrah* like the older generation. Theirs are open *usrahs* such as hiking, going to parks and beaches, and so on. This is how we attract the youth so that we can make them understand [about Islam]. The topics of our conversation are non-political. [Emphasis mine]

Based on their explanation, recruiting members of PAS, or at least making them sympathetic with PAS' struggle, is achieved not through direct political campaigns, but through community bonding. The bond-building strategies are segmented according to relevant target groups, including women, children, teenagers, youth, and even the elderly. Acknowledging that Malaysian youths' political awareness is achieved differently from the elderly generations, the Dewan Muslimat is calculated to attract the youth through activities that they like, not through political rhetoric.

Furthermore, among the elderly generation, the rural educational culture of the *pondok* cannot be underestimated in its role as a bridge towards PAS politics. At least 11 traditional *pondok* institutions exist in Sik alone. Most, if not all, are affiliated or express support for PAS in politics. The relevance of these institutions lies not only in the process of educating future religious scholars or teachers among the young, but as safe havens for the elderly. Most of the *pondoks* will hold weekly gatherings targeted for this group. In the gatherings, the *tok guru* (senior teacher, equivalent to a *kiai* in Indonesian *pesantrens*) reads religious texts written in the Jawi script for them to learn the religion together. As a space, it becomes an avenue to bond the elderly regardless of gender. Some *pondok* in Sik even have special dormitories intended for the elderly to stay, learn, and bond (Participant 5, 2024). They might not have political motives as their primary objective when establishing these institutions, but in the long run, they could function as part of a community-based assistance programme that slowly translates into political sentiment.

The *pondok's* existential function is not limited to providing public educational and welfare resources. They serve as symbolic resources for PAS's political legitimacy endorsed by the generally religious masses. In Sik, a time-honored tradition is that, on the nomination day before every election campaign period begins, PAS candidates and their supporters will march from Pondok Rahmaniah, Pekan Sik to the election nomination centre located at Pejabat Majlis Daerah Sik. Upon announcement of election results, regardless of whether they win or lose, PAS candidates will greet supporters at Pondok Ubudiah, Sungai Pau (Participant 3, 2023). These gestures function as a symbol that displays how closely the political activities of PAS interweave with local communal institutions.

Local *pondok* institutions meet the high demand for accessible religious education. In the process, participants in the *pondok*-organised programmes will be acclimatised to PAS as a political party of their choice, thereby revealing the 'communitarian clientelist' relationship between the populace and these educational institutions.

Electioneering and Communal Affiliations

Although Sik has an overwhelming majority of the Malay population, the Siamese are one significant minority in many villages across the district. From the perspective of local political operators, parties will often frame their respective electioneering strategies according to community preferences.

At least after the General Election (GE) 1999, in Sik, the majority Malay population is divided between groups that support PAS and those that support UMNO, with roughly equal strength. In the wake of the GE 2008, the support of the non-Malays, especially the Chinese population (~1.5%) shifted to the opposition coalition, resulting in former teacher Che Uda Che Nik winning the Parliamentary seat of P013 Sik with a slim majority of 481 votes. Subsequently, he was defeated in GE 2013 by BN candidate Mansor Abd Rahman with a majority of 2,807 votes (SPR 2025).

Looking at the vote counts, in a first-past-the-post electoral system, the winner in Sik must be significantly influenced by minority populations. Aside from the Chinese and Indians, the Siamese population in Sik could be considered a significant minority, with official statistics recording their numbers at around 5.3%. Albeit the small percentage, at a micro-level, their votes matter (Gill, Mohd Razali and Ahmad Tarmizi 2014). Historically, Siamese communities typically vote in a bloc voting style with a consistent preference for UMNO up until GE 2018. According to the locals, this is due to the generous policies by UMNO, including regarding them as part of the *bumiputera* community with constitutional privileges under the first Mahathir Mohamad's administration.

Acknowledging this trend, PAS strategists geared up engagement with the Siamese community as early as 2008 under the administration of Azizan Abd Razak as the Chief Minister of Kedah. According to Muhammad Ismadi Abdul Kadir who served as Special Officer to Azizan and now to Sanusi:

Since Ustaz Azizan became the Menteri Besar in 2008, we knew that getting the votes from the Siamese community is a challenge. He was the first Menteri Besar that created a special unit under the state government known as Unit Hal Ehwal Orang Siam (Siamese People Affairs Unit) with me as the Head. It was created with a purpose to engage and to quickly solve the issues that they face. In the long run, we want to get bloc votes from them or at least reduce their votes for UMNO. [Emphasis mine]

Muhammad Ismadi (affectionately known as Paklong Madi among the locals) mentioned that the complicated state bureaucracy made it difficult for issues of the Siamese community to be solved in a swift and efficient manner,

including issues related to land ownership documents that have been pending for years to the agony of the community. The land ownership issue has been played well by Parti Peribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU). This observation is corroborated by Mohd Khizri, the UMNO Chief of Sik, in the interview. Paklong Madi was glad to hold the position because he could “solve their issues swiftly and gain their trust”. Electoral campaigns became relatively easier. However, he still faced an obstacle—he is from PAS, an Islamic party, while the majority of the Siamese are Buddhists.

In 2017, BERSATU was successfully registered by Mahathir Mohamad and Mahiaddin Yassin. Paklong Madi made a decision, with ‘blessings from Sanusi himself’ to switch his party to BERSATU, aiming at influencing the Siamese votes. He reckoned that the Siamese people in Kedah are generally indebted to Mahathir’s administration. Since he is from BERSATU, it makes sense for them to switch votes from UMNO to BERSATU, or at least break down their *en bloc* support for UMNO. In our interview, he proudly credited his strategy of breaking down the Siamese votes as the reason why all three seats in Sik, namely P013 Sik, N23 Belantik, and N24 Jeneri were wrested by PAS in GE 2018, again maintaining them in GE 2022 and SE 2023.

Knowing the trends among the Siamese minority and Malay majority in Sik, Paklong Madi, with his other political operators, is aware that as long as the trend continues, a broken *en bloc* vote among the Siamese community will mean a loss for UMNO (and in the highest probability, a win for PAS). Even though in 2018 BERSATU was part of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, the political climate in Sik made it impossible for PH to secure a significant number of votes. Therefore, a vote for PH will indirectly mean a gain for PAS in the 2018 three-way contest.

The UMNO leadership in Sik also acknowledges their electioneering approach that has successfully influenced the outcomes of elections. Mohd Khizri, the defeated candidate against Sanusi in SE 2023, admitted that:

Yes, in the past, it can be said that 100% of the Siamese population supported BN and UMNO. But recently, there were opposition political leaders that wanted to win against BN using sensitive issues like rights to own land and property among the non-Malay Bumiputeras [...] when people come and promise that they will support your ethnic group, who wouldn’t like it?

In the rural Malay (and Siamese) community context, contrary to liberal assumptions that focus on individual voters as decision-makers, on-the-ground evidence suggests that rural society in Sik may be thinking differently. Using the intimate experience of Paklong Madi as PAS’ and BERSATU’s political operator,

votes among Sik's population are more decisively determined by voters' affiliations to their respective villages, life histories, and ethnic memberships. Without dismissing the fact that there are votes based solely on individual choices, party strategies in Sik are more geared towards communities than towards individuals.

Plus, among the rural population, other variables that characterise party differences include which *kampung* (Participant 6, 2018; Participant 7, 2022; Participant 3, 2023) the person is living in and which mosque the person is praying at (distinction between 'masjid PAS' and 'masjid UMNO' is increasingly becoming insignificant in recent years compared to the post – Amanat Haji Hadi era of the mid-1980's). By analysing campaign and electioneering strategies from the perspective of an integral member of Sanusi's team, we could understand their approach to navigating how the population in Sik exercises their democratic rights.

CONCLUSION

Based on data from in-depth interviews, participant observations, and analysis of local political rhetoric, PAS has successfully utilised its presence among the grassroots to project long-term community engagement for decades since the 1990's. Besides, a deep understanding among their political operators of the locals' voting behaviour suggests more nuanced voting decisions beyond liberal assumptions.

Besides, activities organised by rival political parties, including PAS and UMNO, in collaboration with mostly non-political institutions, slowly developed local political sentiments that could be translated into votes. This article offered an explanation on how PAS utilised social interactions in the rural context to gain trust and build rapport with the local communities. PAS serves the demands of their clients beyond material and personal affective touch—a sense of community and social connections constituting the matrix of personal values. In short, a relationship of communitarian clientelism.

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APPENDIX

Comparison of PAS electoral achievements in Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu

Election Year	State					
	Kedah		Kelantan		Terengganu	
	PAS Parliament Seats	PAS State Seats	PAS Parliament Seats	PAS State Seats	PAS Parliament Seats	PAS State Seats
1990	0	1	6	24	1	8
1995	0	2	6	23	1	7
1999	7	12	10	41	7	28
2004	1	5	6	23	0	4
2008	6	16	8	38	1 (+1 in by-election 2009)	8
2013	1	10	9	32	4	14
2018	3	15	9	37	6	22
2022	9	N/A	9	N/A	7	N/A
2023 (State)	N/A	33	N/A	37	N/A	27

Source: SPR (2025).

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