

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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## **Borneo Survey: Autonomy, Identity, Islam and Language/Education in Sabah**

*Lee Hock Guan\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- A survey of East Malaysia commissioned by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute showed that greater autonomy for the state received all round support from the Muslim bumiputera, non-Muslim bumiputera and Chinese communities in Sabah. The three top areas which the majority of respondents felt the state should be given more control over were the economy, oil resources, and education.
- Respondents displayed a very strong regional identity with nearly two-thirds identifying themselves as Sabahan first, compared to only 27 per cent who identified themselves firstly as Malaysians.
- A majority of Muslim and non-Muslim bumiputera polled supported equal treatment for all Sabahans while only a minority supported special bumiputera privileges.
- 90 per cent of the Muslim bumiputera respondents supported Islam as the state official religion, while 84 per cent of Chinese respondents and 43 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents would not.
- 46.8 per cent of the Muslim bumiputera respondents, 61.9 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents and 78.9 per cent of Chinese respondents supported English as an official state language. There was strong support across all three communities for reinstating English schools.

\* *Lee Hock Guan is Senior Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute recently commissioned a public opinion survey of East Malaysian's perspectives on Federal-State relationship, identity/religion, education/language and selected current issues. Where Sabah was concerned, a sample of 803 respondents were interviewed via fixed-line and mobile phones. Respondents consisted of Malaysian citizens aged 21 and above who resided in Sabah. The respondents were selected through a random stratified sampling method across the constituency district of residence, controlled by quota for ethnicity, age and gender. While all state constituencies in Sabah were covered, there were some interior localities in more remote constituencies which could not be sampled due to inadequate telecommunications coverage.

In total, there were 385 (47.9 per cent) Muslim bumiputera respondents, 276 (34.4 per cent) non-Muslim bumiputera respondents and 142 (17.7 per cent) Chinese respondents. 130 respondents were between the ages of 21 and 30 years; 270 respondents were between the ages of 31 and 40 years; 214 respondents were between the ages of 41 and 50 years; 121 respondents were between the ages of 51 and 60 years; 68 respondents were 60 years old and above. The survey's estimated margin of error is  $\pm 3.46$ .

Ever since Sabah joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, the state's autonomy<sup>1</sup> has been a point of contention in federal-state relations. Between late 1990 and early 1991, several opposition Sabahan leaders were detained under the Internal Security Act for allegedly planning to secede Sabah from Malaysia.<sup>2</sup> The demand in the state for more autonomy has clearly increased since the 2013 general elections when the Barisan Nasional (BN) won the elections but lost the popular vote, and significantly became more dependent on support from its Sabahan allies.

With 42 ethnic groups and over 200 sub-ethnic groups, Sabah is demographically the most diverse state in Malaysia. In 1970, the Kadazan, Dusun and Muruts (KDM) comprise 32.9 per cent of the total population, followed by the Chinese at 21.3 per cent, Other bumiputeras 19.4 per cent, Bajaus 11.9 per cent, Malays 2.8 per cent and Other non-bumiputeras 11.7 per cent. However, by 2010, the KDM's and Chinese share of the population had fallen to 29 percent and 12.8 per cent respectively, while the Malays, Bajaus and Other bumiputeras increased by 8 per cent, 19.4 per cent and 28.5 per cent respectively. That the majority of Other bumiputeras are usually Muslims was mirrored in the increase in the Muslim population from 40.1 per cent in 1970 to 57.8 per cent in 2010. The Christian population also increased but at a lower rate; from 24.2 per cent in 1970 to 31.5 per cent in 2010.

The huge support among non-Muslim bumiputeras for the state receiving more autonomy is due in part to the community's stature it previously held as the largest and most dominant group in the state and in part to their being marginalized by the Malay Muslim-dominated federal government. Since the mid-1990s, a series of developments enabled the Muslim bumiputeras to become the largest and most dominant community in Sabah. In contrast, Chinese political importance has diminished in Sabah to about only 10 per cent of the total state population, down from nearly 25 per cent in the 1960s.

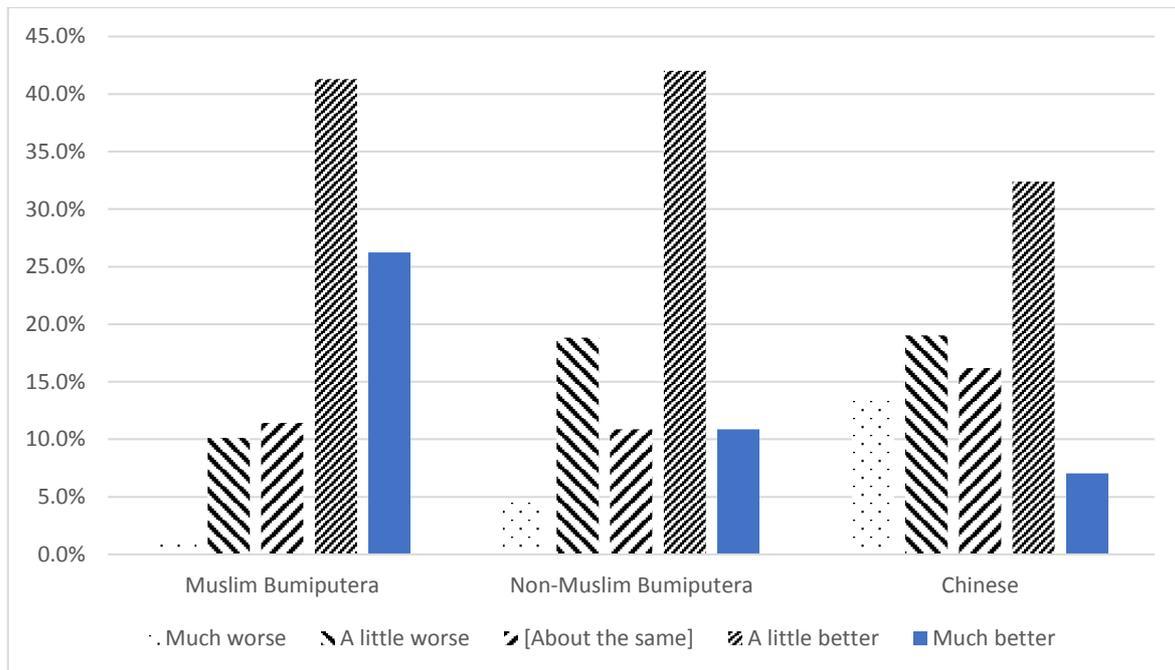
In the Malaysia Agreement of 1963 (MA63), Sabah did not object to Islam being the national religion of the Federation, but insisted that there should be no state religion in the state and that the provisions relating to Islam in the Constitution of Malaya should not apply in Sabah. However, in 1973 Chief Minister Mustapha Harun successfully tabled a bill in the Sabah state legislative assembly to amend Article 5A of the state constitution to make Islam the state's official religion.<sup>3</sup> The question of hudud has also been a passionately debated and contested topic in Malaysia ever since Dr Mahathir Mohamed, then Prime Minister of Malaysia, declared in November 2001 that Malaysia was already an "Islamic state".<sup>4</sup> More recently, in 2017 Hadi Awang, President of PAS, unsuccessfully tried to table a private bill (RUU355) in Parliament to amend the penal code to enable the application, albeit limited, of hudud in Kelantan.

In MA63, Sabah agreed to recognize Malay as the national language and in return it was permitted the use of English in the state for a period of ten years after 1963 and it was agreed that English should be an official language of Sabah for all purposes, including education, indefinitely. In 1970 however, Chief Minister Mustapha Harun introduced Malay as the medium of instruction in schools in the state – following the national education policy. Subsequently, in 1971 he tabled and passed a bill in the Sabah state legislature to make Malay the single language for communication in official correspondence and for use in the state and federal legislatures.

### **AUTONOMY ISSUES<sup>5</sup>**

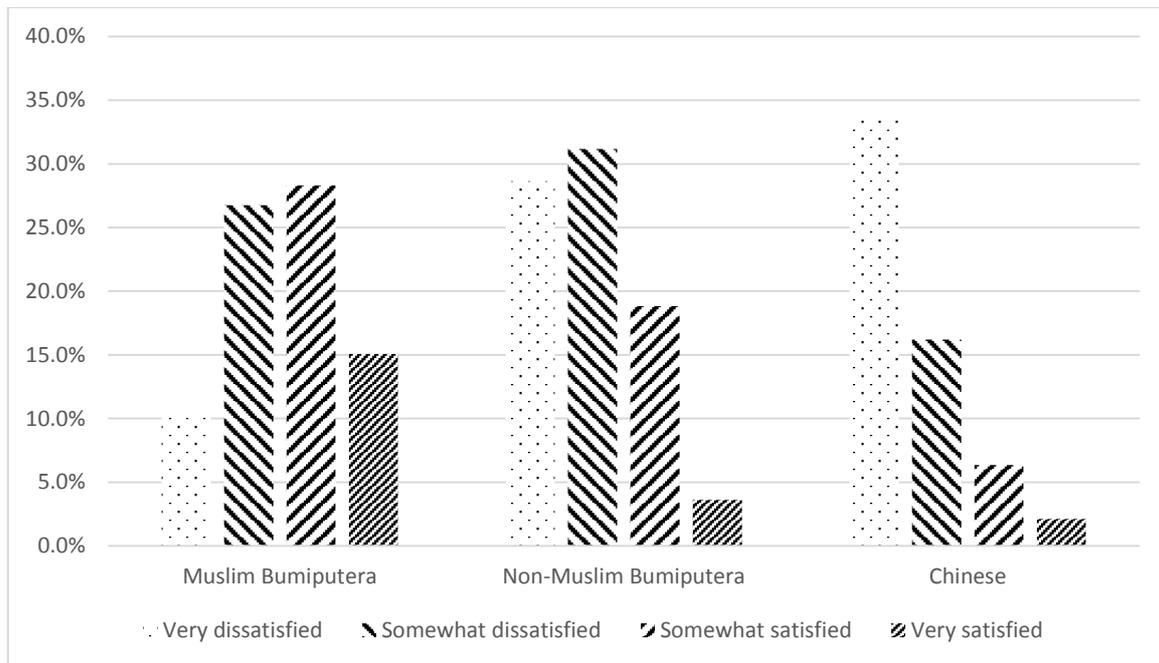
The survey found that about 58 per cent of respondents felt that Sabah was better off for having joined the Malaysian Federation in 1963. While 67.5 per cent of Muslim bumiputera respondents agreed that the state is now better off, only 52.9 per cent of the non-Muslim bumiputera respondents and 39.4 per cent of the Chinese felt that the state had gained from joining the Federation (Figure 1A). In fact, nearly a quarter of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents and 32.4 per cent of Chinese respondents thought the state was in fact worse off for joining Malaysia, compared to the 11.4 per cent of the Muslim bumiputera respondents who felt the same way.

Figure 1A: Do you think that Sabah is better off or worse off by joining Malaysia since 1963?



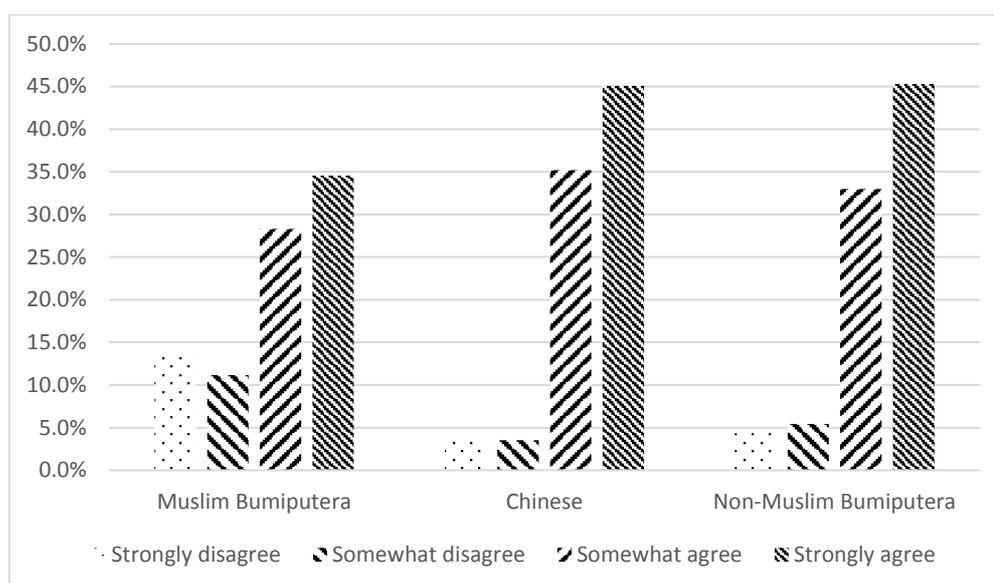
47 per cent of respondents polled were dissatisfied with the way the federal government has addressed MA63. Only 30 per cent were satisfied with federal treatment of the MA63. Even among Muslim bumiputera respondents, only 43.4 per cent were satisfied while 36.9 per cent were dissatisfied with how the federal government has upheld the MA63 (Figure 1B). Nearly 20 per cent of Muslim bumiputera respondents were unsure or refused to answer. The majority of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents (59.8 per cent) and Chinese respondents (50 per cent) were dissatisfied with the way the federal government has upheld the MA63. Just 22.4 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents and 8.4 per cent Chinese respondents thought that the federal government has honoured the MA63.

Figure 1B: How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way the Malaysia Agreement 1963 has been upheld by the federal government?



Across all demographic segments polled, the majority opinion was that Sabah deserves greater autonomy to determine its affairs than is currently accorded it by Putrajaya. Among Muslim bumiputera respondents; 34.5 per cent strongly agreed, 28.3 per cent somewhat agreed and about 25 per cent disagreed that Sabah should be granted more autonomy (Figure 1C). The overwhelming majority of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents (80.3 per cent) and Chinese respondents (78.3 per cent) agreed that Sabah should be granted more autonomy. The strong support among non-Muslim bumiputera respondents, specifically the Kadazandusuns and Muruts, for the state receiving more autonomy is due in part to their having once been the largest and most dominant group in the state and in part to their being marginalized by Malay Muslim-dominated federal government.

Figure 1C: How strongly do you agree or disagree that Sabah should have more autonomy?



The top six areas that the majority of respondents felt that the state should have more power to manage were; the economy (59 per cent), oil royalty (30 per cent), education (29 per cent), border security (20 per cent), revenue sharing (20 per cent) and religious affairs (19 per cent) (Figure 1D). It is clear that the majority felt that Sabah state should have more power to run the economy and the natural resource sectors, along with the education system.

Figure 1D: In which areas should Sabah have greater autonomy?

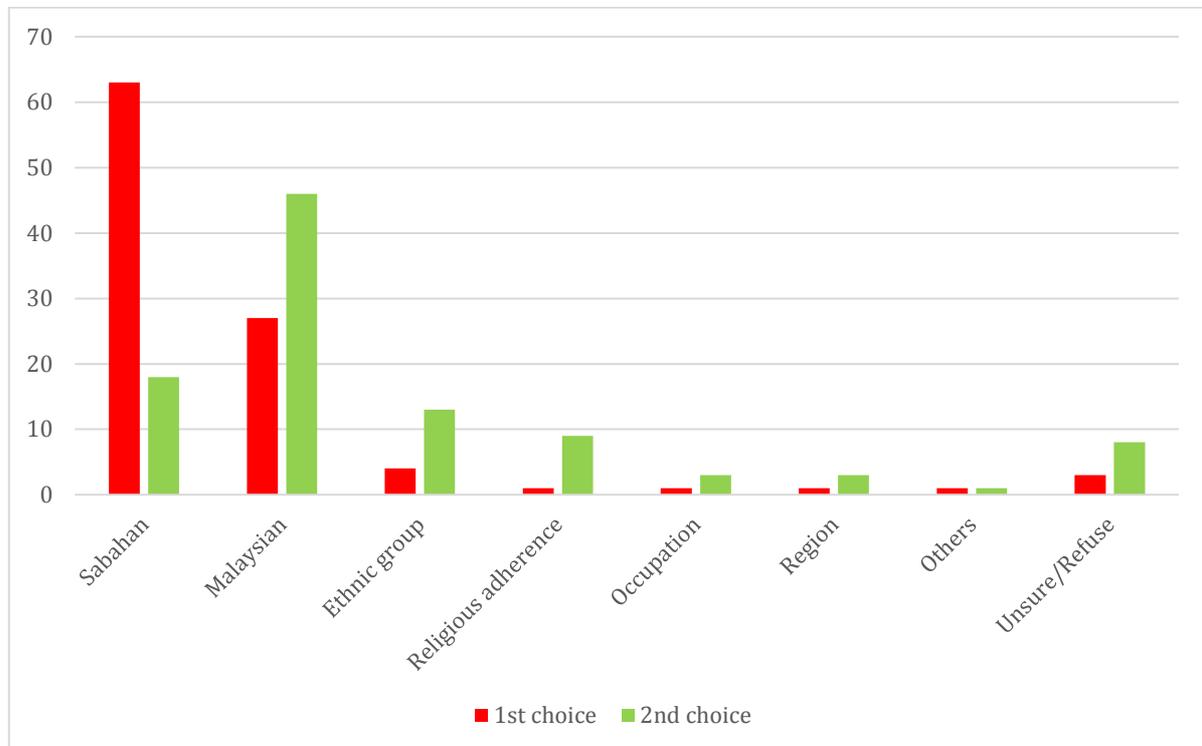
	Economy	Oil royalty	Education	Border security	Revenue sharing	Religious affairs
First choice	49	8	11	8	8	11
Second choice	10	22	18	12	12	8
Total	59	30	29	20	20	19

## IDENTITY, ETHNIC RELATIONS AND SPECIAL PRIVILEGES

The survey sought to find out what Sabahans identified themselves most strongly as. Nearly 63 per cent of the respondents identified themselves as Sabahan first, compared to only 27 per cent who identified themselves as Malaysians first (Figure 1E). Only 4 per cent of respondents identified themselves firstly based on ethnicity, and less than 2 per cent identified themselves firstly by religious affiliation. More importantly, the strong identification with Sabah is uniformly high across all the three communities—68.5 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents, 64.4 per cent of Muslim bumiputera respondents and 46.5 per cent of Chinese respondents. The strong regional identity in Sabah is in marked

contrast to their fellow citizens in Peninsular Malaysia where 55 per cent identified themselves firstly by religious affiliation.

*Figure 1E: When thinking about identity, how would you like to be identified as first?*



The perception that ethnic relations are good in Sabah is confirmed by the survey. The overwhelming majority of respondents, 81 per cent, agreed that inter-ethnic relations were good (Figure 1F). When asked to evaluate the ethnic relationship today compared to five years ago, nearly two-thirds of the respondents felt that people in the Sabah were “getting closer” compared to the 14 per cent who felt that ethnic relations had gotten “further apart”. 84 per cent of Muslim bumiputera respondents and of Chinese respondents and 75 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents felt that ethnic relations in the state were good. However, while 76 per cent of Muslim bumiputera respondents and 70 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents felt that ethnic relations were getting closer, only 20 per cent of Chinese respondents felt that way. In fact, 29 per cent of Chinese respondents felt that ethnic relationships were moving further apart.

*Figure 1F: Compare to 5 years ago, do you think inter-ethnic relations in Sabah are getting closer together or moving further apart?*

Sector	Ethnic relationship in Sabah today		Compared to 5 years ago	
	Bad	Good	Getting closer	Further apart
Total	6%	81%	64%	14%
Muslim Bumiputra	5%	84%	76%	9%
Non-Muslim Bumiputra	8%	75%	70%	14%
Chinese	6%	84%	20%	29%

The poll also found that 55 per cent of respondents felt that all Sabahans should be treated similarly, while 40 per cent felt that special privileges be kept for the bumiputeras (Figure 1G). Among the Chinese respondents, 28 per cent thought that special privileges be kept for bumiputeras and 61 per cent felt that all Sabahans should be treated similarly. In contrast, 42 per cent of Muslim bumiputera respondents and 43 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents support reserving special privileges for bumiputeras.

*Figure 1G: In your view, should all Sabahans be treated similarly or should special privileges be kept for bumiputeras? How far do you think that all bumiputera groups are treated equally?*

	Special treatment	Special privileges be kept for Bumiputera	Bumiputera Group Treated equally	
	Similarly		Unequal	Equal
Total	55%	40%	34%	57%
Muslim Bumiputera	54%	42%	28%	65%
Non-Muslim Bumiputera	53%	43%	41%	51%
Chinese	61%	28%	37%	45%

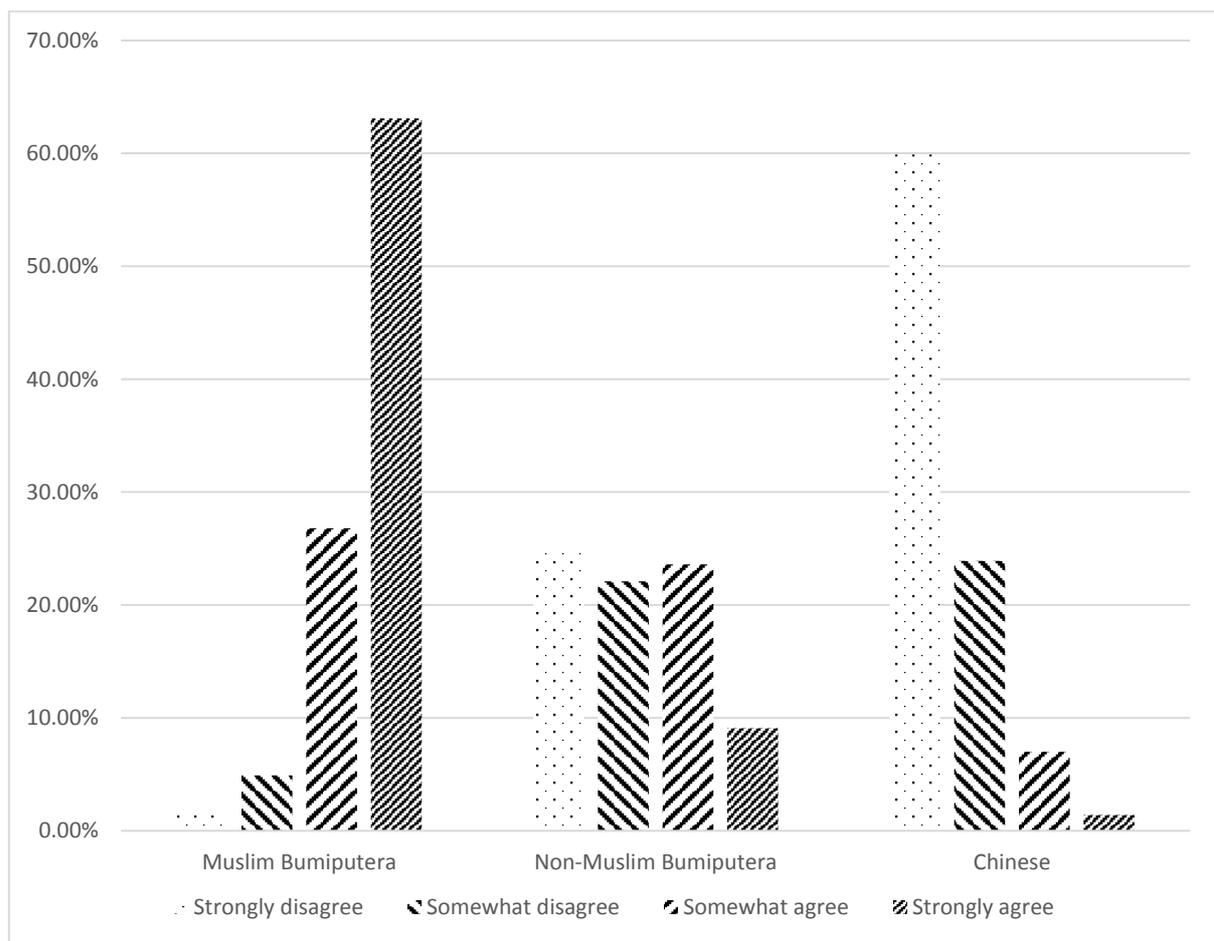
When asked about whether all bumiputera groups were being treated fairly, the responses received were different across ethnic lines: In Sabah, 57 per cent of the respondents believed that all bumiputera groups were being treated equally and 34 per cent felt that not all bumiputera were being treated equally. About two-thirds of Muslim bumiputera respondents (65 percent) thought that bumiputeras were fairly treated while non-Muslim bumiputeras were split in their views with 51 per cent agreeing and 41 per cent disagreeing that bumiputeras were fairly treated. Among the Chinese respondents, 45 per cent thought

that all bumiputeras were treated equally and 37 per cent thought that they were being unfairly treated.

### ISLAM AS STATE RELIGION AND HUDUD

The survey asked respondents about their views on Islam as state religion. The responses indicated that while 56 per cent of the respondents agreed to Islam being state religion, they were divided along ethnic/religious lines. Muslim bumiputera respondents and Chinese respondents gave the most diametrically opposing responses with 90 per cent of the former agreeing and 84 per cent of the latter disagreeing to Islam as state religion (Figure 1H). Non-Muslim bumiputera respondents were split, with 33 per cent agreeing and 47 per cent disagreeing.

*Figure 1H: Do you agree or disagree that Sabah should have Islam as state religion?*



Sabah respondents showed low support for the Islamic criminal law, with only about 29 per cent respondents supporting it. Unlike in Peninsular Malaysia where hudud draws large-scale support among Muslims, Muslim bumiputera respondents in Sabah were split with 45 per cent supporting it, 39 per cent not supporting it and 16.3 per cent indicating that they

were unsure or did not know (Figure 1I). Rejection of hudud law was highest among Chinese respondents at 85 per cent, while among non-Muslim bumiputera respondents, 58 per cent did not support it, only 7 per cent support it and 23.6 per cent were unsure or did not know.

*Figure 1I: How strongly do you support or do not support hudud law being implemented in Sabah? How strongly do you think that hudud law is suitable in Malaysia including Sabah?*

	Implementation of Hudud Law		Hudud Law in Malaysia	
	Do not support	Support	Not suitable	Suitable
Total	54%	29%	57%	26%
Muslim Bumiputera	40%	45%	45%	41%
Non-Muslim Bumiputera	58%	17%	62%	16%
Chinese	85%	5%	82%	6%

Overall, 57.2 per cent of respondents thought hudud law not suitable for Malaysia. Significantly, while a majority of Muslim bumiputera respondents personally supported hudud law, equally a slight majority of them did not think the law suitable in multicultural and multireligious Malaysian society; 44.6 per cent felt that hudud law was unsuitable, 40.8 per cent felt it was suitable and 14.0 per cent were unsure or did not know. Among non-Muslim Bumiputera respondents, 61.6 per cent agreed that hudud law was not suitable for the country, as did 79.4 per cent of Chinese respondents.

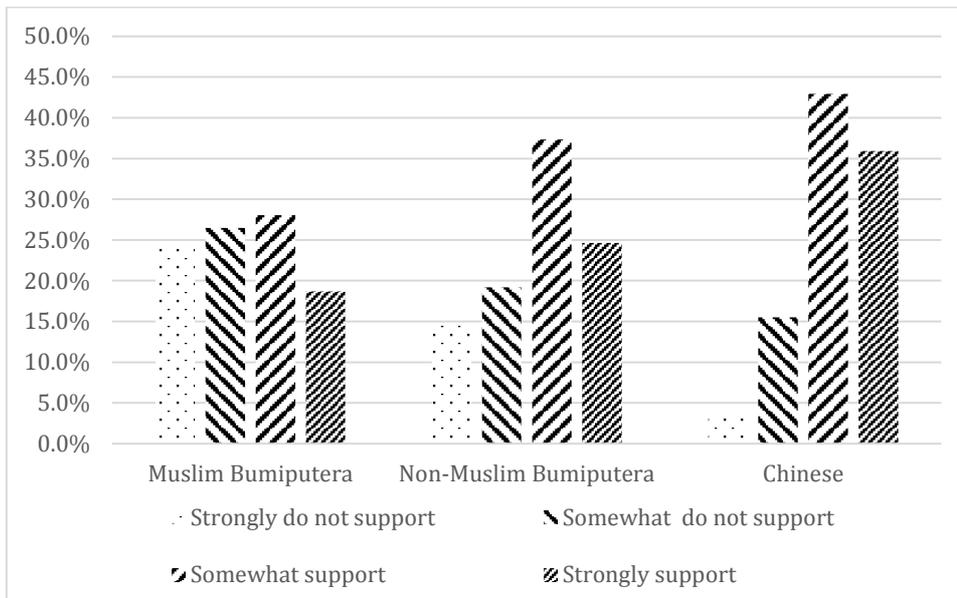
The survey also found that the support for hudud law among Muslim bumiputera respondents was inversely related to their age. Support for hudud law was higher among younger respondents. For example, those between 21 and 30 years old tended to have more than 50 per cent expressing support. The responses were also divided along gender lines, where male Muslims tended to reject hudud law while female Muslims were more inclined to express support for it. The highest income bracket (more than RM5000) of Muslim bumiputera respondents in Sabah also showed more support for hudud law compared to lower-income Muslim bumiputera respondents.

**OFFICIAL STATE LANGUAGE, ENGLISH SCHOOLS AND ONE TYPE OF SCHOOL FOR ALL**

The survey found that the majority of respondents in Sabah—58 per cent—supported reinstating English as state official language. However, the support for English as the state official language varied among the three communities. The Muslim bumiputeras’ responses were split, with 50.9 per cent not supporting and 46.8 per cent supporting English as state official language (Figure 1J). In contrast, 61.9 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera

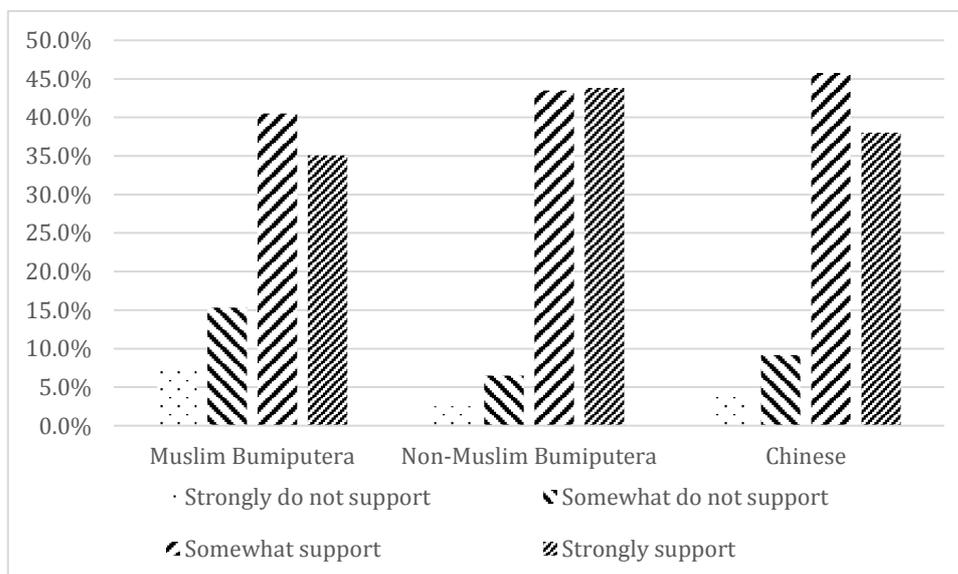
respondents and an overwhelming 78.9 per cent of Chinese respondents support bringing back English as the official language in the state administration.

*Figure 1J: How far do you support or not support English as the official language in the Sabah's state administration?*



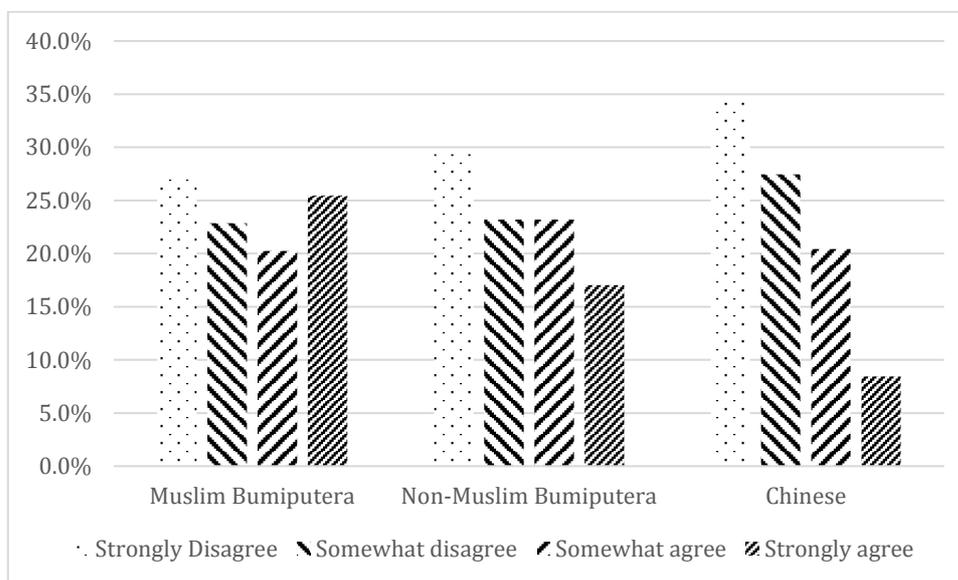
The majority of respondents supported bringing back English-medium schools in Sabah. Non-Muslim bumiputera respondents were the most supportive, at 87.3 per cent, in restoring English schools, followed by 83.8 per cent of Chinese respondents and 75.6 per cent of Muslim bumiputera respondents (Figure 1K).

*Figure 1K: How far do you support or not support bringing back English language medium schools in Sabah?*



The 3 communities surveyed were divided in their responses to the question of adopting one type of school in order to promote unity among all citizens at an early age. Muslim bumiputera respondents were divided between 49.9 per cent disagreeing and 45.8 agreeing (Figure 1L). Similarly, non-Muslim bumiputera respondents were divided, with 52.5 per cent disagreeing and 40.2 per cent agreeing with having one type of school to facilitate integration. However, 62 per cent of Chinese respondents disagreed and only 28.9 per cent agreed that a one-school system could help to promote ethnic integration at an early age.

*Figure 1L: How far do you agree or disagree with the suggestion that there should only be one type of school in the country in order to promote unity among all citizens at an early age?*



## CONCLUSION

Sabahans displayed a very strong regional identity with nearly two-thirds of the respondents identified themselves firstly as Sabahan, compared to only 27 per cent who identified themselves as Malaysians first. Only 4 per cent and 2 percent of respondents identified themselves firstly through ethnicity and religious affiliation respectively. The majority of Muslim bumiputera respondents (64.4 per cent) and non-Muslim bumiputera respondents (68.5 per cent) identified themselves firstly as Sabahans.

The majority of Sabah respondents, about 58 per cent, felt that their state was better off after merging with Malaysia in 1963. Nevertheless, all the three communities surveyed supported greater autonomy for Sabah, with the non-Muslim bumiputera respondents registering the highest support at 80.3 per cent followed by Chinese respondents at 78.3 per cent and Muslim bumiputera respondents at 69 per cent.

While 54 per cent of Muslim bumiputera respondents and 53 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents felt all Sabahans should be treated similarly, more Muslim

bumiputera respondents than non-Muslim bumiputera respondents felt that all bumiputeras were being fairly treated—65 per cent to 51 per cent.

About 56 per cent of respondents support Islam as state religion, with Muslim bumiputera respondents registering the highest support at 90 per cent while 43 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents did not favour it. However, only 29 per cent of respondents support the adoption of hudud with 45 per cent and 39 per cent of Muslim bumiputeras supporting it and not supporting it respectively. When it came to the question of the suitability of hudud for Malaysian society, 44.6 per cent of Muslim bumiputera respondents felt it to be unsuitable compared to 40.8 per cent who felt that it was.

The survey found that 58 per cent of the respondents supported English as an official state language, with 46.8 per cent of the Muslim bumiputera respondents, 61.9 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents and 78.9 per cent of Chinese respondents favouring it. Importantly, 75.6 per cent of Muslim bumiputera respondents, 87.3 per cent of non-Muslim bumiputera respondents and 83.8 per cent of Chinese respondents supported reinstating English-medium schools in the state.

<sup>1</sup> This refers to the 20-point agreement proposed by the State of Sabah for its incorporation into the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63).

<sup>2</sup> Herman Luping, *Sabah's Dilemma: The Political Economy of Sabah (1960-1994)*, Kuala Lumpur: Magnus Book 1994, pp.431-432.

<sup>3</sup> Mohd. Nazim Ganti Shaari, "'Unconstitutional Constitutional Amendments?': Exploring the 1973 Sabah Constitutional Amendment that declared Islam the State Religion", *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2014, 1–21

<sup>4</sup> Later, Mahathir tried to explain that what he meant by "Islamic state" was not the same as that advocated by the PAS: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/7017>

<sup>5</sup> The survey found that a majority of the respondents (58 per cent) reported did not understand the autonomy issue, or specifically the 20-point agreement between Sabah and the Federal government.

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