



It's just politics

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I'D like to begin this week's column with a little lesson in political history. It is about a right that was "forgotten" until the Bornean territories in Malaysia recently started demanding it.

When Malaya, North Borneo (as Sabah was called then), Sarawak, and Singapore formed Malaysia on Sept 16, 1963, there were 159 seats in Parliament. Malaya had 104 parliamentary constituencies, Sarawak 24, Sabah 16, and Singapore 15.

The 55 seats for Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore were to ensure the three territories had one-third - or 35% - of the total number of seats as stipulated in the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63).

However, this equation changed when Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. Singapore's 15 seats were redistributed to Peninsular Malaysia rather than being divided equally between Sabah and Sarawak. So Sabah and Sarawak's parliamentary percentage was reduced to a quarter.

Currently, Peninsular Malaysia holds 165 of the 222 parliamentary seats, while Sarawak has 31, Sabah 25, and Labuan one. Political leaders in both territories are now demanding a return to the 35%, or one-third share, of seats.

Last Sunday, at a community event in Kapit, Sarawak, that

Finally making their voices heard

A confluence of political events means that Putrajaya is now really listening to what Malaysia's Bornean territories are asking for.



Friendly visit: Dressed in Sarawakian vest and headgear, Anwar, ahead of Abang Johari (in brown head-dress) heads towards an event in Kapit on Sept 29. — Bernama

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim attended, Sarawak Premier Tan Sri Abang Johari Openg laid out his case for a one-third allocation of Dewan Rakyat seats for Sabah and Sarawak.

Abang Johari said it would prevent the Federal Government from trying to nullify the provisions of MA63. He explained that the ratio ensured that the non-Malayan territories had veto power in Parliament.

"That is why now we want [the Prime Minister] to give us up to one-third of the seats because the Singapore seats were taken up by the Federation of Malaya," he said, according to *Dayak Daily*.

"It's not that we want it [out of personal interest] but because we want to protect [our rights]. In our parliamentary democracy, you can amend any part of the Constitution as long as you have a two-thirds majority.

"We are just afraid that there is

a possibility of an attempt to cancel the MA63. Who knows? So if we have one-third of the seats, we know the basic fundamental agreement is intact."

On Tuesday, Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Hajiji Noor said his territory stands firm with Sarawak's demand.

Hajiji said the adjustment is also crucial for Sabah's progress, adding that the matter was discussed with the Prime Minister during the MA63 implementation action council meeting on Sept 12.

"We need to evaluate our constituencies, their locations, and how to achieve a balanced distribution.

"This is part of introducing new Parliamentary amendments to ensure our interests are safeguarded," he said.

Sabah's Chief Minister also stressed the necessity of additional seats to match Sabah's vast size and population distribution.

"For example, we cannot have a constituency represented by just 20,000 people. This illustrates the importance of population considerations when establishing new constituencies," he said.

Before the historic fall of the Barisan Nasional government following the 2018 General Election, Malaysia had been ruled by that one coalition from the peninsula since 1963 so there really wasn't any use in Sabah and Sarawak making the 35% seats demand then.

At that time, the governments of the Bornean territories were under the axis of the mighty Barisan. They were like branch managers of the Federal Government. More so Sabah, as it was ruled by Umno from 1994 to 2018. Sarawak, which was under Barisan but led by Sarawak-based parties, was less subservient to Kuala Lumpur's power than some say.

During Barisan's rule, it was

mostly Sabah's Opposition parties, such as Parti Bersatu Sabah (which has been in and out of Barisan since its formation in 1985) and Sabah Star, that voiced the demand for more seats for Sabah.

For example, when Sabah Star president Datuk Seri Dr Jeffrey Kitingan was in the Opposition in 2012, he brought up the matter, asking for the number of seats for Sabah and Sarawak to be collectively increased to at least 35%.

According to Kitingan, going by the spirit of MA63, Sabah and Sarawak should have a minimum 74 seats in a Dewan Rakyat that had grown to 222 seats.

"We must revisit the recommendation in paragraphs 165 and 190(g) of the Cobbold Commission report that 'representation of the Borneo territories shall take into account not only their population but also their size and potentialities'," Kitingan was reported to have said.

Well, nothing came of the demand then, and Sabah and Sarawak currently hold 56 seats between them.

Now, however, there is a ruling government led by a coalition that cannot rule without support from Sabah and Sarawak. With Pakatan Harapan only holding 81 seats out of 222 - it doesn't have the simple majority of 111 seats - Sabah and Sarawak have bargaining power. They have finally found room to make their voices heard.

Whether they get their one-third voice in Parliament will not be settled soon. Last year, Deputy Prime Minister Fadillah Yusof, a Sarawakian, said it may take two to three years before Sabah and Sarawak can be allocated one-third of the Dewan Rakyat's seats.

The warning I got from a senior Sabahan politician, who has seen Barisan's might in action, is this: There might be blowback when Putrajaya gets its act together and moves on this.

Regardless, Sabah and Sarawak will continue to try to correct their historical marginalisation since the formation of Malaysia.