

Legitimacy and Public Trust in Coalition Governments: A Malaysian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the issue of legitimacy in coalition governments in Malaysia following the 15th General Election (GE15), which for the first time produced a hung parliament and subsequently a unity government. While constitutionally valid through parliamentary majority support and the consent of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, public acceptance of this government remains fragile. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study draws on 31 informants through in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD), complemented by secondary document analysis. The findings highlight five major themes undermining popular legitimacy: perceptions of a “forced coalition,” concerns about party dominance, the persistence of identity politics based on race and religion, unclear and inconsistent policy communication and economic confidence. These results are interpreted using Easton’s theory of specific versus diffuse support, Schmidt’s framework of input, output and throughput legitimacy and Public Choice Theory (Buchanan & Tullock). The study also underscores the Sarawak GPS model as an alternative example of coalition stability, achieved through a collective identity, ethnic consensus, and development-oriented politics. Overall, the article contributes to the literature by emphasizing that the legitimacy of coalition politics does not rest solely on parliamentary numbers, but also on the government’s ability to rebuild public trust through transparent communication, balanced power-sharing, and inclusive policymaking.

Keywords: coalition politics, legitimacy, public trust, Malaysia, GE15, unity government, identity politics, governance

1. Introduction

The results of Malaysia’s 15th General Election (GE15) in November 2022 not only resulted in a hung Parliament, but also exposed a deeper crisis, namely the erosion of public trust in political institutions and the legitimacy of government. For the first time in history, no single party coalition managed to secure a simple majority to form a government. This situation ultimately led to the establishment of a *unity government* led by Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Although this government was constitutionally valid, its acceptance among the people was far more complex. The coalition was seen by a large part of the public as a forced compromise that raised questions about its sincerity and long-term sustainability (Ostwald, 2023; Chin, 2023).

According to Easton (1965), legitimacy is not only derived from institutional procedures but also through *diffuse support* based on trust, acceptance and confidence in governance. In the

Malaysian political context, the unity government gains procedural legitimacy when it receives the support of a majority of Parliament with the consent of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. However, popular legitimacy, that is, the willingness of the people to trust and accept the government, is still disputed (Saidin, 2023). The gap between constitutional validity and the level of public trust is the main issue that this article seeks to discuss.

The rapid spread of narratives on social media platforms such as TikTok and Twitter has also reinforced skepticism among young voters. These platforms have become echo chambers which portray the government as unstable, opportunistic and even illegitimate. This shows that the legitimacy crisis is not only about the parliamentary majority count, but also encompasses aspects of public perception and trust building (Welsh, 2018; Wong, 2023).

From the angle theory, a framework introduced by Schmidt (2013; 2020) regarding *input, output* and *throughput legitimacy* give lens significant analysis for understand dilemma legitimacy government combination post GE15. In the Malaysian context, input legitimacy is weakened because the unity government did not emerge directly from the people's electoral mandate. Instead, it was the outcome of elite negotiations rather than the voters explicit choice of coalition. Disadvantages mandate this cause gap between the will of the people with result achieved politics. Temporarily that is, the legitimacy of the dependent output to effectiveness policy government also challenged following direction destination a confused policy as well as delay the implementation of reforms, in particular deep cost of living issues and renewal institution. At the same time, the legitimacy of the referring throughput to quality of the manufacturing process decision visible fragile when tension internal between coalition parties disrupt the administrative process and weaken communication basic. This is parallel with Schmidt's argument that legitimacy only can maintained if all three dimensions this each other complement, as well as weakness in any one dimensions will affect level public acceptance of government in a way overall (Schmidt, 2020).

Meanwhile, issues of representation and identity politics add further complexity to building public trust. Some Malay voters feel that the coalition formed is too influenced by the Democratic Action Party (DAP), while non-Malay voters are concerned about the resurgence of the dominance of The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). This dual anxiety reflects the strong influence of ethnicity and religion in Malaysian politics. Norris (2011) argues that democratic legitimacy must combine procedural justice with substantive inclusiveness. In a divided society, failure to balance these two aspects is bound to undermine trust in governance (Gomez et al., 2020; Nadzri, 2023).

This situation is exacerbated by weak communication in government policies. Confusion about the direction of government, whether reformist or maintaining the status quo, undermines the legitimacy of the throughput. The people now demand not only effective policies but also consistency and coherence in administration. Without clarity, even good reforms can easily be seen as ad hoc or motivated solely by individual political interests.

This erosion of trust also has broader implications, as public confidence is closely linked to political stability, investor sentiment and international credibility. As Pepinsky (2013) and Case (2019) argue, trust is not just a normative issue but also a practical necessity to ensure long-term economic resilience and governance sustainability.

Through this article, the researcher argues that post-GE15, the key question of Malaysian politics is no longer simply a coalition-building mechanism but rather a restoration of public trust. A

unity government must go beyond procedural legitimacy and actively seek to build popular legitimacy. This effort requires institutional reforms that enhance transparency and accountability, policy coherence that is responsive to the needs of the people, inclusive governance that addresses ethnic and religious concerns fairly, and communication strategies that are capable of restoring confidence, especially among young voters.

By focusing on the trust aspect, this study differs from most previous studies that emphasize coalition formation in terms of structure or procedure alone (Laver & Shepsle, 1996 ; Ostwald, 2020). Instead, it positions legitimacy as a relational construct, an ongoing bargaining process between the government formed and the public. Public trust is not something that is automatically guaranteed through electoral results, but rather it needs to be constantly built through responsive governance, fair representation and transparent administrative processes.

In conclusion, the introduction of this article places the Malaysian unity government within the framework of a broader debate about legitimacy and public trust in coalition politics. This article argues that the survival of the existing administration and the future of coalition politics in Malaysia depend not only on the majority in Parliament, but on the ability to rebuild the fragile bond between the government and the people. Without trust, legitimacy will remain empty and with trust, even fragile coalitions can survive.

2. Literature Reviews

2.1. Coalition Politics in Malaysia

Coalition politics is not new in Malaysia. The Alliance Party, which later evolved into the Barisan Nasional (BN), has governed the country for over six decades based on the principle of consociationalism, i.e. power sharing between major ethnic groups through UMNO, MCA and MIC (Means, 1991; Lijphart, 1969). While BN has succeeded in creating political stability, it has done so within a hegemonic framework that has been eroded by corruption scandals, governance failures and changing voter demographics (Case, 2019).

GE14 was a turning point when BN fell for the first time, paving the way for an era of unstable multi-coalition competition. PH ruled for only a short time before collapsing due to internal divisions in 2020, replaced by PN. This series of government after government has eroded public confidence, thus proving the limitations of coalition politics without a foundation of public trust (Gomez et al., 2020; Ostwald, 2020).

Scholars such as Laver and Shepsle (1996) have argued that coalition stability requires clear agreements, high-calibre leadership and institutional mechanisms for resolving conflicts. However, in Malaysia, political coalitions are often formed on an ad hoc basis, driven by short-term survival rather than long-term strategy. The post-GE15 unity government is the latest experiment, but its legitimacy and inclusiveness continue to be questioned.

2.2. Ethnicity, Identity Politics and Belief

The diverse composition of Malaysia's society makes questions of ethnicity and religion more challenging in building coalition legitimacy. Studies by Weiss (2013) and Gomez (2021) emphasize that ethnic and religious identity are still major factors in determining election outcomes and perceptions of government fairness. Although the principle of consociationalism

aims to balance representation, it often reinforces ethnic bargaining practices that perpetuate mistrust between communities.

In a unity government, some Malay voters see DAP as too influential, while non-Malay voters fear UMNO will regain dominance. This anxiety shows how difficult it is to balance symbolic representation with administrative effectiveness. Vaughan (2018) argues that legitimacy in a plural society is easily fragile when identity issues overshadow procedural and performance aspects.

2.3. Legitimacy in Political Theory

Legitimacy has long been a central theme in political science because it forms the basis for the exercise and maintenance of political authority. Traditional legitimacy as explained by Max Weber's, charismatic and rational, remain important foundations in explaining how political power is justified (Weber, 2019). However, in modern democratic systems, the concept of legitimacy goes beyond Weber's framework to also include procedural, performance and public acceptance dimensions (Beetham, 1991). Procedural legitimacy emphasizes compliance with constitutional rules, performance legitimacy assesses the government's ability to deliver policies effectively, while social legitimacy requires wider public acceptance.

David Easton (1965) introduced a more detailed model by distinguishing between *specific support* (short-term support for government performance) and *diffuse support* (long-term trust in political institutions). This distinction is particularly relevant in a fragmented political system because public trust can easily change based on perceptions of the actions of political elites rather than the legitimacy of the law. In the Malaysian context, the post-GE15 unity government managed to gain *specific support* through a majority in Parliament, but still failed to build a *diffuse strong support*, thus raising questions about its durability (Saidin, 2023).

2.4. Democratic Legitimacy: Input, Output and Throughput

Vivien Schmidt (2013) expands the discussion by introducing a framework of democratic legitimacy through the dimensions of *input*, *output* and *throughput*. *Input legitimacy* emphasizes aspects of citizen participation and representation, *output legitimacy* assesses the effectiveness of implemented policies, while *throughput Legitimacy* assesses the quality, transparency and inclusiveness of the decision-making process.

In the case of Malaysia, the legitimacy of the unity government's input is weakened because it does not arise directly from the people's mandate, but rather the result of elite negotiations in a hung parliament (Ostwald, 2023). The legitimacy of the output is still disputed because the policies introduced have not shown consistent benefits to all communities, especially when the people are facing rising living costs. Meanwhile, the legitimacy of the throughput is also affected by internal coalition conflicts and confused policy communication, thus weakening public trust (Wong, 2023).

2.5. Deficit Trust deep Democracy: Global and Regional Perspectives

Phenomenon *trust deficit* not only happening in Malaysia, even to be global issues that get attention undergraduate politics. Hetherington (2005) asserts that decline trust against institution politics in the United States has bring to "deficit" democracy where the people are increasingly skeptical against ability government for act represent interest public. Dalton (2017) also

emphasizes that decline level trust related close with change value generation younger critical towards the governance process and less tied with traditional party loyalty. In overall, literature international show that trust increasingly public decline can weaken base legitimacy politics even though structure institution permanent intact.

In the Southeast Asian context, the same challenges clear can observe. Thailand for example face crisis repeated when combination politics that has been formed often collapsed consequence difference ideology and conflict interest between the parties. This situation causing people to disappear confidence against system choice Raya and the formation process government because they see its existence mix hand army as well as culture party hopping that debilitates the people's mandate. While that, in post -Suharto Indonesia, politics a broad combination at first considered as mechanism for balance interest various parties. However, the problem corruption, dominance of big parties, as well weakness deep the implementation of democratic reforms affects people's trust in effectiveness combination those.

Both cases regional this show same pattern with Malaysia's experience after GE15, namely system various difficult parties maintain stability without a strong foundation of trust. It proves that trust is not just value additional deep democracy, but prerequisite main for guaranteed continuity combination politics. Without belief, any shape cooperation politics will easy be considered as fragile, opportunistic or temporary. Therefore, the study about legitimacy and trust in Malaysian context is not only relevant to discourse domestic but also contribute to discussion regional and global on coalition survival politics in the era of democracy contemporary.

2.6. Public Trust and Political Stability

Public trust functions as both a cause and effect of political legitimacy. Norris (2011) argues that declining trust in political institutions reflects a “democratic deficit” as citizens increasingly feel marginalized from decision-making processes and perceive their interests as often being neglected. This crisis of trust often occurs in societies that experience political instability, frequent changes in leadership, or perceptions of corruption.

The Malaysian context after GE14 and GE15 clearly illustrates this phenomenon. The successive fall of several governments between 2018 and 2022, namely Pakatan Harapan (PH), Perikatan Nasional (PN), Barisan Nasional (BN) and finally the unity government, thus creating a perception that politicians are more concerned with the interests of the elite than with the principles of governance (Welsh, 2018). The Sheraton 2020 move reinforces the perception of betrayal of the people's mandate (Saidin, 2023). As a result, public trust in political actors and institutions is increasingly eroding and creating a prolonged legitimacy gap.

International studies have also linked trust to democratic stability, with Hetherington (2005) and Dalton (2017) showing that low levels of trust can lead to reduced voter turnout, increased populism and sharper political polarization. In the case of Malaysia, young voters are seen as more skeptical, and social media plays a major role in reinforcing negative perceptions of coalition compromise (Welsh, 2018; Wong, 2023).

For example, crisis show feelings in Indonesia that witnessed protes bleeding and pressure withdrawal right special expert parliament is manifestation latest how much legitimacy weak **politics** can trigger collapse social. President Prabowo Subianto finally forced cancel allowance the house that is considered too high namely about 50 million rupiah per month and postpone journey abroad member parliament deep effort ease public anger (Reuters, 2025a; AP News,

2025). The action shows deep abyss between structure formal politics with level people's trust in institution.

The demonstrators, consisting of from various layer society like students, activists and workers, insisting that policy government no representing the common people. Demands them widespread to issue injustice economy and oligarchy politics, not just cutting allowance. This reflects decline *diffuse support* (Easton, 1965), where trust term long against institution politics increasingly fade deep among the people (The Guardian, 2025; Reuters, 2025b).

Implications crisis this clear against economy when market stock declined and the value of the rupiah fell, reflecting effect directly from fragile legitimacy politics to top confidence investor as well as stability national economy (Reuters, 2025a; AP News, 2025). This reminds us of that legitimacy not just issue politics, but also to be prerequisite for continuity economic and social. In the Malaysian context, the same scenario potential appears if government unity failed manage issues sensitive like perception of " combination " " forced ", party dominance and weakness communication base. A crisis of faith is left without handled can bring to wave a challenging demonstration continuity legitimacy of the Government as it happens in Indonesia.

However, Indonesia's experience also shows that legitimacy can restored when the people's voice is given space. Response government even though come after protest hard has proven need mechanism more political responsive. In the Malaysian context, this emphasizes interest public engagement, communication transparent policies and institutional reforms as a medium for build again trust (Welsh, 2018; Wong, 2023).

In a way overall, the crisis in Indonesia gives teaching important that legitimacy procedural through majority parliament is not enough. Popular legitimacy based on People's trust is the key to political survival. Protests in Indonesia prove it that trust is not something automatic, but necessary nurtured in a way consistent through inclusive policies and transparent governance (Easton, 1965; Schmidt, 2013).

2.7. Trust, Markets and Governance Performance

Trust public not only worth in a way normative deep democracy but also has implications great practicality against stability economy a country. Pepinsky (2013) emphasizes that confidence investor very depends on perception stability politics and credibility policy government. In the Malaysian context, the episode change government often since 2018 has been affect perception stability this. Investors, same there is domestic nor foreign, often postpone decision investment because they see risk high politics. This situation parallel with argument that trust politics act as prerequisite important to confidence market.

Furthermore, the direction destination a confused policy also weakens confidence economy. Part policy announced with full reform rhetoric, but its implementation often delayed or seen no consistent. Case (2019) argues that instability long -term politics will inhibit confidence not only deep circle investor internationally, even in among local people. Uncertainty this cause plan development term long difficult implemented, because the policy introduced can change according to change leadership or shift deep combination.

Implications this can observed through reaction market against instability politics in Malaysia. Every time it happens crisis politics or exchange government, index market stock local usually declines while the value of the ringgit also impressed. This gives signal that public trust and

legitimacy politics is factor main influencing factors confidence economy. More worryingly, the uncertainty this can prevent implementation of the development agenda such as the MADANI Economic Plan which requires support market and confidence consistent investor for successful. Therefore, build again trust public not just need deep dimensions politics but also is claim urgent economic situation. Without coherent policies, clear communication, and transparent governance, the government combination although legal from side constitution fixed risky failed interesting investment, implementing reforms, or maintain growth sustainable. Therefore, efforts restoring the people's trust will works as base not only for stability politics, but also for guaranteed power hold the country's economy in term long.

2.8. Gaps in Literature

Although there have been many important studies examining coalition politics in Malaysia, there are still some notable gaps. Much of the existing literature has focused on structural and institutional aspects such as electoral systems, power-sharing arrangements and inter-party negotiations (Lijphart, 1969; Strom, Müller & Bergman, 2008). However, less attention has been paid to the rational dimensions of legitimacy, in particular how public trust shapes the survival and effectiveness of coalition governments.

Furthermore, comparative studies often emphasize the success of the consociational model in Europe but rarely integrate lessons from pluralistic societies in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, especially post-GE15, it is clear that the survival of a coalition depends not only on elite bargaining but also on the extent to which the government is able to build and maintain public trust across ethnic, generational and socio-economic lines.

2.9. Legitimacy Challenges in Political Coalitions

The post-GE15 coalition government in Malaysia faces various challenges in maintaining its legitimacy. These challenges stem from several key factors, including internal coalition fragility, ideological conflicts and party interests, pressure from the grassroots, and negative perceptions formed through social media. This situation shows that the legitimacy of a government depends not only on the majority in Parliament but also on the level of acceptance of the people towards the form of political cooperation that has been established.

One of the main challenges is the significant ideological differences between the parties that form the government. In the Malaysian context, a unity government combines parties with different political backgrounds, some of which were even former political rivals. For example, Pakatan Harapan (PH) is dominated by the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) brings an agenda of democratic reform, inclusiveness and progressive policies. In contrast, the UMNO-based Barisan Nasional (BN) has a long history as a conservative Malay party with a strong nationalist orientation.

The cooperation between PH and BN after GE15 was seen as paradoxical because these two blocs had faced each other directly as political enemies since 1998. Most voters still remember PH's rhetoric that loudly criticized BN's administrative practices, especially after the 1MDB scandal was unraveled. Therefore, when the two finally worked together to form a government, there was a perception that the coalition was not born out of political sincerity but was merely a compromise to maintain power.

A study by Laver and Shepsle (1996) has shown that coalition politics tend to be fragile when parties have large ideological gaps. This increases the risk of policy conflict, with each party trying to defend its own core interests. For example, issues of Cabinet position allocation, implementation of Bumiputera economic policies and debates on institutional reform are often points of friction between parties in unity governments.

In addition, pressure from the party's grassroots also affects the legitimacy of the coalition. Most party members at the grassroots level find it difficult to accept cooperation with traditional opponents. For them, cooperating with political enemies is considered a betrayal of the party's principles of struggle. For example, the majority of UMNO supporters expressed dissatisfaction when the party chose to join a unity government with PH. This is because for a long time, UMNO has presented DAP as a threat to Malay-Muslim interests. On the other hand, PH supporters are also divided on accepting UMNO, which has been labeled as a symbol of corrupt and feudal politics. This situation creates a major challenge in building internal cohesion because the coalition parties risk losing their respective core support.

According to Golder (2006), coalition instability often stems from internal pressures that ultimately force parties to withdraw from cooperation. If this conflict is not managed well, it can undermine the stability of the government as a whole.

After GE15, two main scenarios were considered to form the government, namely a Pakatan Harapan–Perikatan Nasional (PH-PN) coalition or a Pakatan Harapan–Barisan Nasional (PH-BN) coalition. Although in terms of numbers, the PH-PN coalition was able to achieve a comfortable majority, the negotiations failed due to a wide ideological gap and differences in political strategies. In the end, the choice that occurred was a PH and BN coalition with GPS, GRS and several other small parties. However, this collaboration was immediately labeled as a “marriage without love” (*marriage of convenience*). This term is not only used in academic discourse but also in public conversation which sees the coalition as a forced measure to avoid political deadlock.

Based on meeting chat in-depth (IDI) conducted by researchers deep writing thesis masters, some informants reveal thing this in a way continue bright.

An informant from Sabah stated:

“Kerajaan ini macam kerajaan paksa... mereka bukan mahu bersama dari awal, tetapi kerana tiada siapa ada majoriti, jadi terpaksa duduk sekali. Itu sebab orang ramai rasa kerajaan ini tak ada keikhlasan.” (R14)

This quote reflects the sentiment that the legitimacy of the unity government is questioned not because of the lack of a majority but because of the perception that the collaboration was born out of exigent circumstances, not a genuine choice.

Meanwhile, a study by Tapsell (2018) showed that digital media ecosystem in Malaysia provides space big to formation narrative affordable alternative challenging mainstream media dominance premiere. Phenomenon this increasingly noticeable post GE14 and GE15 when social media, especially platforms such as TikTok, Twitter and Facebook, appeared as source information main for part big voters young.

Unlike traditional media, which is controlled by institutions or a particular party, digital media allows more discourse free, spontaneous and viral. Narrative negative about government coalition, including the label "government" "forced" or "government" door back "spread" with fast because it easy repeated, shared and made material campaign politics no official.

Speed spread narrative the cause effort official government for explain rational formation combination often drown deep current contradictory information. As argued by Wong (2023), social media works as *echo chamber* where perception negative strengthened deep circle users, especially generation young demanding clarity and consistency deep governance. Situation this show that crisis legitimacy government combination not only caused from weakness structure politics but also from failure master field digital communication that is site main formation perception contemporary.

2.10. Sarawak's Coalition Political Model: A Reference for Malaysia's Political Stability

In the debate over the legitimacy of coalition governments in Malaysia, one dimension that is often overlooked is the unique experience of the Sarawak political block. The state is not only rich in natural resources but also has a different political history from the Peninsular. Since the formation of Malaysia in 1963, Sarawak politics has been more regionalist with local parties rooted in their respective ethnic communities. Despite being part of the Barisan Nasional (BN) for over four decades, Sarawak finally chose to stand on its own after the defeat of BN in the 14th general election.

The decision led to the formation of the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) comprising the United Bumiputera Party (PBB), the Sarawak People's Party (PRS), the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and the United Sarawak People's Party (SUPP). The GPS shaped its political identity through the slogan "Sarawak First", which emphasised the interests of the state over the power struggle at the centre. This approach gave the GPS strong legitimacy among the people of Sarawak, making it a more robust domestic coalition model.

For unity governments at the Federal level, the GPS model offers valuable lessons on how a coalition can maintain long-term stability through a clear identity, balanced power sharing, and a focus on a concrete development agenda. This model prioritizes the voices of the diverse people from various ethnic backgrounds, rather than narrow political interests.

2.11. History of GPS: From BN to Political Autonomy

GPS was officially formed in June 2018, shortly after the collapse of BN at the national level. Its four component parties in Sarawak decided to leave BN after realizing that BN's image was tarnished by the 1MDB scandal and corruption issues involving the central leadership. However, unlike the parties in the Peninsular, they did not join Pakatan Harapan (PH). Instead, they chose to form their own coalition that emphasized more on development politics and state autonomy.

This move proves that political legitimacy does not only come from following a national coalition but also through the ability to build a local narrative that is in line with the aspirations of the people. According to Chin (2023), the GPS strategy allows Sarawak to strengthen its bargaining position with the central government, whether in discussions on development allocations or the issue of the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63).

In other words, GPS shows that a coalition can remain stable if it has a concrete foundation of struggle that is accepted by the people, rather than simply the result of elite compromises for the sake of maintaining power.

An informant from Sarawak explained:

“lebih kepada konsensus. Kita tak boleh ada satu pihak yang dominan sangat..siapa yang lead gabungan itu perlu adil kepada semua ahli” (R21)

This mechanism not only reduces the risk of internal conflict, but also builds the perception that the GPS truly represents the diversity of Sarawakian society. In contrast to politics in the Peninsula, unbalanced power sharing is often a frustration in the coalition political model that exists in the country's political landscape today.

Several key factors have been identified as contributing to Sarawak's political stability, including respect for leadership, a spirit of power sharing, and a strong rejection of race-based politics in the state's political culture.

“Saya kata sangat stabil. Saya rasa banyak yang lain telah melihat bahawa kita stabil. Satu perkara, terutamanya di Parti PBB adalah hormat kepada kepimpinan.” (R19)

In addition, GPS is also described as a coalition that does not practice single-party dominance in state administration, but rather prioritizes clear power sharing among its component parties. This approach allows each party to feel the value of their participation is recognized. thus reducing the risk of internal conflict.

“Kita tidak cuba menerima semua kekuatan. Kita mahu berkongsi kekuatan dengan parti lain.” (R19)

There is also a perception that the existing coalition political system fails to guarantee balanced representation, and sometimes even creates political dominance by certain groups, whether in terms of party, community or social class. Another informant emphasized the suggestion that the political model be re-drafted to be fresher, free from old political influences that are seen as hindering the emergence of new leadership and fresh ideas in the administration.

“Bagi saya, untuk wujudkan politik yang betul-betul tulen dengan pemikiran segar, kepimpinan baharu, gabungan parti-parti besar yang kuat ini mesti dihentikan. Sebab bagi saya, ia seolah-olah politik buli.” (R28)

A notable difference with Peninsular Malaysia is that the GPS has managed to reduce the emphasis on race-based politics. Instead, coalition structures are formed based on inter-ethnic consensus. Studies by Weiss (2013) and Ufen (2020) show that political coalitions that reduce identity polarization are more likely to maintain long-term stability because the focus is on governance and development, rather than racial antagonism.

3. Methods

This study uses a qualitative design with a case study approach, aiming to examine the issue of legitimacy and public trust in the formation of a coalition government after the 15th General

Election (GE15). The qualitative design was chosen because it allows the researcher to understand the meanings, perceptions and experiences of informants in depth in a complex social and political context.

3.1. Study Design and Data

The main data for this article was obtained from in-depth interview (IDI) sessions and focus group discussions (FGD) conducted in the researcher's master's thesis entitled Evaluation of the coalition political model in the Malaysian political system. A total of 31 informants were interviewed, covering various backgrounds such as politicians, analysts, academics and youth representatives.

Purposeful approach Sampling is used to select informants. This method is suitable because the informants selected have experience, knowledge and direct involvement with coalition political issues. Justification for the use of purposive sampling is to get an in-depth view of aspects of legitimacy, public trust and political dynamics post GE15.

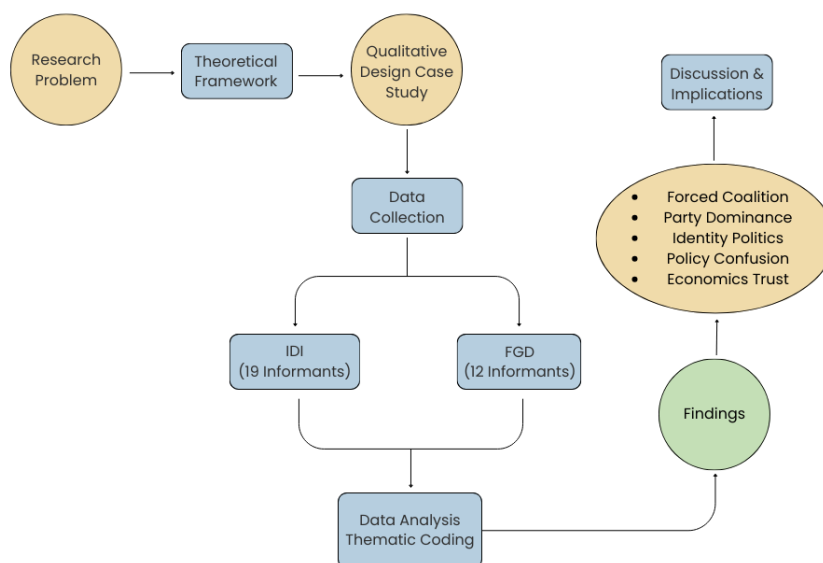
In addition to primary data, this study also analyzed secondary documents such as official government statements, media reports, and previous academic studies. This document analysis aims to provide additional context and triangulation to the interview data.

3.2. Data Collection Process

In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face in three selected states, namely Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia, depending on the suitability of the informants. All interviews were recorded with the informants' permission and fully transcribed for analysis purposes. Focus group discussions were conducted with 12 informants in one session held in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah and were conducted with open-ended question guides that allowed for interactive discussions.

The overall research design is illustrated in Figure 1, which summarises the stages from conceptual framework to data analysis and findings.

Figure 1: Flowchart of research design showing sequential steps from theoretical framework, data collection (IDI & FGD) to thematic analysis and findings.



3.3. Research Ethics

The confidentiality of informants' identities was maintained and all informants gave consent before the interviews were conducted. Sensitive data involving political views was handled carefully to avoid negative implications for the informants.

4. Results

This study found although government unity post- GE15 is valid from side constitution, it faces gap legitimacy at the level acceptance of the people. Most informant distinguish between validity law with a sense of acceptance society. A person informant emphasizes bitterness fragile base support this:

“Saya tidak rasa sekarang ni government kita solid... tak stable, tak stable... Atas kertas united. Dia goyang lah sebenarnya. Dia rapuh.” (R28).

Findings early formulates a sense of doubt that crosses the region when its existence concern about stability cooperation, balance power and clarity direction heading Some even emphasize that government this only survives because of formal support in Parliament, but at the root root, belief not yet really built with strong.

A person informant explains it in a way continue bright:

“Penggabungan itu “boleh diibaratkan seperti ‘kahwin paksa’, jadi ia tiada chemistry.” (R14).

One person again admits need compromise deep reality parliament depending on:

“Tidak ada satu pun parti yang mempunyai absolute majority... maka kita harus susun pakat-pakat-pakat untuk menunjukkan satu kerajaan campuran.” (R29).

Quotes describe reception forced which erodes the sense of sincerity in the eyes of the people. For some voters, narrative this cause doubt that combination like this more oriented towards political survival from an honest reform agenda.

The theme of party dominance or community also noticeable. Among informant Malay, there is anxiety against DAP's influence and in circle not Malay, exists annoyance against possibility return UMNO dominance. An informant to summarize:

“Yang majoriti yang nampak lebih kuat adalah DAP. So, rakyat ada hak untuk berasa takut.” (R28).

One person again adds dimensions ethno-symbolic:

“...kita juga lihat there is a very overly dominance of satu komuniti.” (R23).

This pattern marks that people's assessment of legitimacy many driven by a sense of representation symbolism and balance power, not only number majority. Findings this once

goose show that the people are still evaluate government from perspective identity politics that often used deep rhetoric politics current premier

In terms of process and capabilities make decision, informant emphasize ambiguity direction policy and difficulty government achieve strong decision deep resentment combination. One informant stated:

“Accountability government ni macam tiada... bila kita tanya... oh kami tidak boleh sebab kami ada kawan lain yang actually opposed to that.” (R14).

He also mentioned:

“Kerajaan kita sekarang... susah membuat strong decision making... Ia tidak akan dipacu oleh keperluan sebenar tetapi dipacu oleh keperluan pelbagai.” (R14).

This perspective this strengthened by a other informants:

“Sekarang, kita tak ada kesepaduan... Ini bukan kesepaduan, ini kecelaruan.” (R28).

The collective image is the administrative throughput that is not convincing in the eyes public. In the context of this, weakness communication policy also worsen situation because the people feel confused about direction destination real government.

Some of the informant also linked legitimacy with stability economy. Relationship this expressed clearly by a person informant:

“Keyakinan itu boleh meredakan umpang-ambingnya pasaran. Bila keyakinan pasaran ada, pelaburan masuk akan mencetus keyakinan pasaran domestik.” (R23).

Some also see a combined motive as way manage need economy wider across class and community:

“...mereka sering kali bergabung untuk mencipta dasar ekonomi yang lebih luas... memanfaatkan pelbagai lapisan masyarakat.” (R30).

Findings this shows that people value government not only at the origin combination, but also the ability deliver stable results. Absence clarity deep policy economy potential affect not only political trust but also stability market deep term long.

Interestingly, the informant from Sarawak featuring contrast stability. They describe GPS as a combination that works top base consensus, respect leadership and partnership power.

“Saya kata sangat stabil... [ramai] melihat bahawa kita stabil.” (R19)

“Lebih kepada konsensus. Kita tak boleh ada satu pihak yang dominan sangat.” (R21).

This context give reference in the country about how identity collective and mechanism consensus can add legitimacy of the people. Comparison this also confirms stability combination not solely determined by a numerical formula but by culture politics appreciative locals consensus, balance and collective agenda.

5. Discussion

Findings study this insist that legitimacy government combination post-GE15 in Malaysia still fragile because it exists gap noticeable between legitimacy procedural with legitimacy of the people. Although government unity formed with support majority Parliament and the consent of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, level public acceptance is not parallel with validity constitution This is in line with Easton's (1965) framework that distinguishes between *specific support* (short term support to performance government) and *diffuse support* (long term support based confidence against institutions). In the Malaysian context, the government unity obtains *specific support* through number majority but failed cultivate *diffuse support* because the people see it as result compromise politics simply.

One of theme the main one that appears is perception of " combination" " Forced." Informant from Sabah and Peninsular Malaysia in a way consistent describe government this as an unacceptable compromise born from sincerity, but rather for the sake of political survival. Narrative this parallel with Laver and Shepsle's (1996) argument that the combination formed without base clear ideology riskier for collapsed due to conflict policy and struggle interest Internal. Findings field show how people judge not only validity procedural, but also intentional politics behind cooperation The absence of charter together or principle a clear collective cause confusion about direction Government's goal once goose weaken *throughput legitimacy* (Schmidt, 2013).

The findings also underline how dominance of a particular party to be cause main doubts of the people. Some big voters Malay see DAP as too influential, while voters not Malays are worried about UMNO's return dominate policy. This situation shows people's sensitivity towards balance power and symbolism representation. Public Choice Theory (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962) helps explain phenomenon this coalition parties act according to incentive politics for maximize benefits, but act reply this often trigger dissatisfaction deep circle supporters because of political costs felt more big compared to benefits. So, the dominance of a particular party seen as shape injustice deep distribution power, once goose ruin legitimacy of the people.

In addition, the factor ethnicity and religion continue form trust dimension. Meeting FGD conversations in Sabah show anxiety cross community that combination politics after GE15 not really reflect the will of the people. This consistent with Norris (2011) argues that legitimacy democratic deep society plural not only depends on formal rules, but also on inclusiveness substantive. In the Malaysian context, failure balance dimensions ethnic -religious with policy inclusive arouse suspicion prolonged between community. Fragile nature this more noticeable because it amplified by the social media narrative that spreads description government as no stable or forced, once goose corrosive again confidence public.

Weaknesses communication policy government unity also worsens crisis legitimacy. The people feel confused with message mixed between reform and the status quo until difficult believe sincerity government. Schmidt (2013) emphasizes that *throughput legitimacy* depending on the clarity of the making process decisions and communication policy. Disadvantages deep aspect this not only affect the support of the people, even give effect to confidence market as touched

by some informants who associate trust with stability investment. Here, legitimacy politics and stability economy each other in touch namely without confidence politics, market to be no certain, and without stability economy, legitimacy politics increasingly eroded.

In context This, the GPS model in Sarawak provides significant comparison. GPS succeeded maintain stability due to practicing partnership clear authority, consensus ethnicity, as well as refuse politics racism as base main combination. Findings field from Sarawak shows that a combination rooted in identity collective like "Sarawak First" easier got legitimacy of the people because it builds narrative with sincere, not solely compromise elite. Comparison this confirm findings literature Weiss (2013) and Ufen (2020) that combination that reduces polarization identity more capable hold for term long GPS also shows that legitimacy can strengthened through development-based people's needs and consensus internal, something that is still failed shown by the combination in the Peninsula.

In a way overall, discussion this insist that legitimacy deep government combination no can only depends on the procedure law or number majority. It necessary supported with the people's trust built through inclusiveness, clear communication, balance power and a concrete development agenda. If the aspect this ignored, government unity risky to be fragile although legal from side constitution. On the other hand, if the trust can restore, fragile combination even though can last a long time. Malaysia can take lesson from Sarawak's experience that legitimacy-based trust and consensus far away more capable hold from just legitimacy procedural.

This study gives some implications important against development theory and practice politics in Malaysia. In terms of implications theory, findings study this strengthen argument that legitimacy politics no can only evaluated based on validity procedural solely. Even though the government combination post- GE15 is valid from corner constitution, level low public acceptance proves its existence gap between legitimacy procedural with popular legitimacy.

This is confirming its relevance Easton's (1965) theory on difference between *specific support* and *diffuse support*, as well Schmidt's (2013) framework relates input, output and throughput legitimacy. This study also expands understanding based on Public Choice Theory (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962) with emphasize how the actions of the parties in combination for maximize each other's interests can incurring political costs that ultimately affect trust public.

In terms of implications practical, study this give clear message to government unity and political parties in Malaysia. First, the government necessary emphasize transparency and effectiveness communication policy so that the people are clearer about direction destination Second, the administrative mechanism partnership more power balanced necessary strengthened for reduce perception domination by one party certain. Third, the development and reform agenda must be implemented in a way be consistent so that legitimacy can restored through result tangible benefits felt by the people. Fourth, reduction rhetoric politics-based race and religion are very important because of politics identity proven to be barrier main deep construction trust public.

In a way overall, study this insist that the future politics coalition in Malaysia only will stable if strengthened with legitimacy of the people. Survival of the government not only determined by the number seat in Parliament but depends to how far the government able build again people's trust through governance that is inclusive, transparent, consistent and responsive.

6. Conclusion

This study insists that crisis Malaysian politics after GE15 is not only caused from failure obtain majority easy, but more fundamental again is problem legitimacy and trust public. Create first time deep Historically, Malaysia has witnessed Parliament depends on the end give birth government unity. Although legal from side constitution, reality politics this show gap big between validity procedural with acceptance of the people. This is what becomes point set off study this, that is understand how people judge validity government not only from side number chair, but also sincerity, representation, and trust.

Findings chat in-depth (IDI) and FGD shows consistent pattern. Most of them informant describe government unity as a " combination" forced ", result compromise for the survival of the elite politics, not choice pure. Perception this reinforced with suspicion against dominance of a particular party, same there is DAP in the eyes part voters Malay or UMNO in the eyes voters not at the same time, factors ethnicity and religion continue to be lens the people 's main evaluate government, making trust fragile even though government works in a way legal.

Findings this parallel with Easton's (1965) theory that distinguishes between *specific support* and *diffuse support*. Unity government obtain support specific through majority Parliament but failed cultivate support spread based on confidence term long against institution. Argument this reinforced by Schmidt's (2020) framework on *input*, *output* and *throughput legitimacy*.

The legitimacy of the input is weakened due to the absence mandate directly, the legitimacy of the output is challenged because of the policy no consistency and legitimacy of fragile throughput consequence conflict internal as well as weakness communication Furthermore, Public Choice Theory (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962) explains that coalition party action for maximize interest Each political action raises " political costs " which ultimately corrosive trust supporters.

In dimensions practical, study this show that the people are increasingly sensitive against issue communication policy. Social media like TikTok and Twitter isn't just space discourse, but to be shaper narrative dominant politics, in particular deep circle voter's young people. Perception of "government forced" and "government back door" spread more fast compared to narrative official government. This is proven that communication weak policy can collapse throughput legitimacy, all at once accelerate erosion people's trust.

As in comparison, the GPS model in Sarawak shows example different. GPS successful maintain stability because it has identity a clear collective "Sarawak First", partnership balanced power and focus to politics development. GPS rejects domination one party and reduces emphasis against politics-based race. This is creating greater legitimacy of the people strong because they believe combination that really to fight for the interests of the state. Lessons from this GPS important as reference for strengthen combination at the level federation.

In terms of donation theory, study this enrich literature politics combination in Malaysia with connect it in a way empirical to debate legitimacy and trust public. From the point of view practically, it gives signal clear that the survival of the government combination not only need number chair, but more important is built public acceptance through policy inclusive, communication transparent and representative balanced.

Finally, conclusion big as can be formulated is the future politics coalition in Malaysia depends to the trust as factor determinant. Without trust, legitimacy permanent empty even though legal

from side law with trust, a fragile union even though able last a long time and bring stability politics that the country needs. This is challenges and opportunities for government Malaysian unity for build again contract social with the people, based on better governance responsive, fair and inclusive.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Ethics Approval and Informed Consent

All informants were fully informed about the aims and procedures of the study and written consent was obtained prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

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