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Resurgence of regional coalitions in Sarawak and Sabah since the federal elections of 2018 and 2022

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the resurgence of regional coalitions in Sarawak and Sabah following the 14th and 15th General Elections, respectively. It shows how federal-level government changes in Malaysia can result in the realignment of regional parties in Sarawak and Sabah, which had significantly shaped Malaysia's political landscape as BN's frontline states. The resurgence of the regional coalitions, *Gabungan Parti Sarawak* (GPS) and *Gabungan Rakyat Sabah* (GRS), demonstrates not only the fragmentation of national politics and the rise of regionalism but also the ease with which regional parties dominated by strongmen and aided by patronage can realign, enter and exit coalitions.

KEYWORDS

Regional coalitions; regional parties; *Gabungan Parti Sarawak* (GPS); *Gabungan Rakyat Sabah* (GRS); Malaysia's general election 2022

Introduction

Soon after Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15) in November 2022, the Sabah People's Alliance (*Gabungan Rakyat Sabah*, GRS) which helms the Sabah State Government quickly cut ties with the National Alliance (*Perikatan Nasional*, PN). The Sabah chapter of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (*Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia*, Bersatu) which dominated GRS even broke away from the parent party and morphed into *Parti Gagasan Rakyat Sabah* (Gagasan). This is comparable to the developments in Sarawak soon after the 14th General Election (GE14) in May 2018, when the Sarawak chapter of the National Front (*Barisan Nasional*, BN) cut ties with its national body and rebranded itself as Sarawak Parties Alliance (*Gabungan Parti Sarawak*, GPS). Both happened after the national coalitions, PN and BN, failed in their bid to capture or retain power at the federal level.

These reflect less a resurgence of regional parties than a resurgence of regional coalitions. The political landscape has long been dominated by regional parties. With a few exceptions like the Sabah chapters of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Bersatu, and both the Sarawak and Sabah chapters of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), national parties perform poorly in the Borneo region. The power of Borneo regional parties has indeed risen after BN lost its two-thirds majority in 2008. Hence, the demand for regionalism has grown louder. The early parties in Sabah and Sarawak were first organised into regional coalitions – Sabah Alliance, Sarawak United