

External Factors Influencing the Involvement of Muslim Students in Sarawak in Off-Campus Politics

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Abstract

This study focuses on the importance of students in politics and the significance of their involvement in driving socio-political changes. It specifically examines the context of Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU 2019), which expanded students' freedom to engage in political activities beyond campus boundaries. The study aims to determine external factors influencing the political engagement of Islamic students and discuss their involvement; and to assess the impact of demographic backgrounds on the external factors influencing the political participation of Islamic students in Sarawak. The research methodology encompasses quantitative research through the Purposive Sampling method. The outcomes of the t-test analysis, drawn from a survey sample of 505 respondents spanning from 2022 to 2023, reveal that Sarawak's Islamic students possess a strong inclination towards external factors that influence their political engagement. However, their inclination towards active participation in off-campus politics is relatively low. The findings indicate that the current educational level significantly influences the behavior of Islamic students, prompting their interest in comprehending politics beyond the campus. This article proposes suggestions to cultivate proactive political idealism among Islamic students, aiming to contribute to a better future for both Sarawak and Malaysia as a whole.

Keywords: Activism, Youth, Islam, Campus, Students, Role, Politics

Introduction

Student involvement in politics remains a crucial issue in Malaysia, particularly concerning elections and the youth's freedom of expression. Recent reports have highlighted political activities carried out by students across various universities and campuses nationwide,

including in Sarawak (Aziz, 2023; Lim & Tan, 2024). While a minority of students are aware of their right to voice their opinions, obstacles hinder their movement beyond campus due to prevailing regulations (Ismail, 2022). This is attributed to their adherence to existing acts. Simultaneously, a majority of students seem indifferent to governmental amendments that grant them greater political participation and expression, a trend observed not only in Peninsular Malaysia but also in Sarawak (Rahman, 2023; Wong, 2024).

Under the 1971 Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU), students' involvement is significantly constrained. As per Lah (2018), students exhibit low political awareness, a trend observed not only in Peninsular Malaysia but also in Sarawak. Despite amendments introduced in 2012, many remain unaware that they can participate as politicians and voters upon turning 21, a fact also overlooked by political parties (Chin, 2022). A total of seven amendments have been made reveals that the University Students Movement (GMU) has presented a memorandum to Malaysian Members of Parliament, calling for the repeal of AUKU (Malay Mail 2023). According to GMU, AUKU is antiquated legislation that hampers academic freedom and students' right to organize. However, it's vital to recognize that the 2019 amendments aimed to prevent students from engaging in politically destabilizing activities (Tan, 2020).

In fact, during a townhall session at the University of Malaya on April 6, 2023, panelists, including MPs, activists, and students, deliberated on abolishing AUKU and granting students political engagement freedom (Malaysia Now, 2023). Although they acknowledged challenges and risks tied to student political involvement, like strict legal enforcement and academic suspensions, the panelists stressed the need to preserve students' political participation freedom. This townhall session aims to foster open discourse on AUKU-related issues and student rights in Malaysia.

Regarding student political idealism, the government encourages students to contribute constructive perspectives for national development. The potential insights from students hold significance due to their capacity for critical and creative thinking, coupled with a strong idealism for driving change and progress. Students are seen as mature and astute decision-makers in politics, as their university education and training equip them for this role. The article asserts that students' political involvement provides fresh perspectives on political matters and raises public awareness and understanding of democracy and Malaysia's political system (Sinar Harian, 2023)

Political idealism needs practical skills and adequate knowledge of the political system and governance. The government's Undi-18 education program aims to cultivate political maturity among students, with a specific focus on introducing Malaysia's electoral system and related laws (Malaysia Gazette, 2022). In a statement by Malaysia's Minister of Higher Education, Noraini Ahmad, the ministry's role in nurturing responsible and mature students for the political sphere is underscored. Ahmad emphasizes that implementing Undi-18 and student political involvement are crucial for ensuring that the younger generation has a voice in shaping the nation's future. She also emphasizes the importance of ethical and politically conscious behavior by students in political activities (Astro Awani, 2022)

Considering the perspective of Sarawak's campus youth from a political party angle, the ruling party values the young votes from campus youth as crucial for their support. UKAS Sarawak's (2022) reveals that students and youth affiliated with the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) Youth Organization express support for GPS leadership, seen as advocating Sarawak's interests. This support is conveyed through a memorandum to Sarawak's Chief Minister. The

article stresses the significant role students and youth play in shaping political policies and generating innovative ideas for a better Sarawak.

The significance of investigating student political engagement in Malaysia cannot be overstated. At its core, this topic intersects with fundamental democratic principles, youth empowerment, and the evolution of governance structures. By scrutinizing the challenges and opportunities faced by students in participating politically, researchers can uncover insights vital for fostering a robust democratic culture and ensuring the inclusion of youth voices in governance processes.

This study is needed due to several reasons. The presence of laws like the 1971 Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU) significantly restricts students' political involvement. Despite amendments, there persists a pervasive lack of awareness among students regarding their rights and opportunities for political participation upon turning 21. Addressing this awareness gap is crucial for empowering students to exercise their democratic rights effectively (Ismail, 2022; Lah, 2018).

From the perspective of academic freedom and expression, AUKU has been criticized for hampering academic freedom and students' right to organize. Understanding the implications of such legislation on student activism and expression is essential for safeguarding democratic values within educational institutions and society at large (Tan, 2020).

Malaysia's youth possess immense potential for contributing constructive perspectives to national development. However, translating idealism into practical political engagement necessitates equipping students with the requisite knowledge and skills. Initiatives like the Undi-18 education program play a pivotal role in nurturing political maturity and empowering students to actively participate in shaping the nation's future (Malaysia Gazette, 2022).

Thus, a study is necessary to investigate university youth and their engagement beyond campus. The primary objectives of this study are (1) to study the relationship between gender, age, ethnicity, current educational level, highest educational institution, and external factors influencing Islamic students' political involvement and (2) discussing Islamic students' engagement in off-campus politics.

Literature Review

Previous studies in the realm of external factors shaping the participation of Islamic students in off-campus politics in Sarawak have been undertaken. Some of these investigations have focused on the facets influencing the involvement of Islamic students in politics on a broader scale in Malaysia. For instance, a research team led by Chamhuri et al (2019) highlights the interdependence of students and politics. It suggests that nurturing political literacy among students can have favorable implications for the nation. As posited by Altbach (1966), students have historically been at the forefront of inspired leadership in national liberation movements, political parties, and, to a lesser extent, labor organizations and cultural collectives. The study by Chamhuri et al (2019) identifies the strong nationalist fervor present among students in the 1960s and 1970s, which incited active political engagement. Notably, during that period, there were no specific legal restraints on students' political activities. However, the contemporary landscape contrasts sharply, with the participation of higher education students in politics being governed by the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (AUKU).

Darmayadi (2011) asserts that fostering political literacy among students holds significance as an approach capable of inspiring them to reconfigure societal frameworks. Drawing from

Denver and Hands (1990), political literacy encompasses knowledge and comprehension of political processes and issues. Shaari, Besar, and Jali (2017) contend that students have been exposed to political literacy from their formative years through subjects like Civic and Citizenship Education, Malaysian Studies, and Ethnic Relations.

The viewpoints and evaluations of students regarding political developments are pivotal in aligning the objectives of political stakeholders with the government's accomplishments. A specific study by Ismail, Abdullah, Hassan, and Nor (2020) targeted educated youth—students of public universities in Peninsular Malaysia—to ascertain their perspectives on the country's political evolution. The study unveils varying outlooks across ethnic groups concerning prevailing political developments. According to Ismail et al (2020), Malay students lean towards providing objective viewpoints on the nation's political trajectory, whereas Chinese and Indian students exhibit a more favorable outlook on the modern era of Malaysian governance.

Furthermore, the extent to which students incline towards political comprehension assumes a crucial role in stimulating their reflections on policies, strategies, and programs instituted and executed by the government. Ashaari and Adli (2019) emphasize that students favoring active and critical thinking are more attuned to political comprehension due to their educational background. A parallel insight is discernible in a study by Zan et al (2016) culminates in the assertion that the perspectives and opinions of university students can reshape the nation's political and administrative landscape in the future. The study centers on political responsibility among students, encompassing participation in campus elections and registration as voters with the Election Commission (EC). Analytical findings suggest that students exhibit modest to moderate levels of political knowledge and comprehension.

Demographic factors influencing political responsibility include age, year of study, and field of study. These concerns cast a potential challenge for the nation's future development, as they could give rise to political quandaries. Ashaari and Adli (2019) also acknowledge that political quandaries can galvanize students to collectively seek resolutions through sustained discussions and debates until issues are amicably resolved. However, the vigorous involvement of students in campus elections has not translated into a corresponding engagement in general elections, evident from statistical trends showcasing a declining number of registered voters in Malaysia from the 2008 general elections to the 2013 general elections. This study's results underscore that university administrations, entrusted with educating students about democracy, have faltered in their responsibility, leaving students grappling to comprehend their significance and obligations within the democratic framework. Consequently, prior literature studies underscore that social and economic factor, alongside the influence of social media, exert influence over students' political involvement in Malaysia. Nevertheless, an exigency remains for further research that scrutinizes more granular factors concerning the participation of Islamic students in off-campus politics, particularly within the context of Sarawak.

Research Methodology

The questionnaire's formulation draws from and adapts insights from (Mamat et al., 2015; Taib et al., 2017). This research also integrates insights from literature, utilizing relevant sources from books and journals to illuminate the challenges faced by students in politics and potential solutions.

Respondents were selected from university students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Sarawak Campus, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), and Universiti Putra Malaysia

(UPM) Bintulu Campus, yielding a total of 506 respondents. Demographic analysis was limited to individuals meeting specific criteria: first, respondents had to be Muslim. Second, they had to be students studying in Sarawak universities. Third, they had to be aged 18 and above. Students were requested to complete the questionnaire, structured with two sections: respondent demographics and questions pertaining to student challenges and politics. The selection of respondents utilized Judgmental or Purposive Sampling.

Subsequently, the gathered data undergoes analysis using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 28.0. Research findings demonstrate that the questionnaire items exhibit a high degree of reliability. Furthermore, these items demonstrate validity, accurately measuring their intended constructs, as confirmed through assessments of face validity, content validity, and construct validity. Data analysis encompasses both descriptive statistics and inferential statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics encompass the compilation, arrangement, presentation, processing, and summarization of collected data. Inferential statistics aim to extrapolate insights about a population based on a selected sample for study, forming the critical component of drawing conclusions and decisions based on collected and processed data.

The analysis of the overall reliability of the questionnaire items indicates a very high degree of reliability. Additionally, the validity of the questionnaire items has been tested through three stages: face validity, content validity, and construct validity. Validity testing for construct validity employs the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure to ensure high confidence and alignment with the questionnaire items. Values below 0.50, according to Hair et al. (1998), indicate a lack of validity. The KMO values for the political involvement variable exceeded 0.5, specifically 0.704 ($p > 0.5$), indicating a strong relationship between the 19 items within the political involvement construct. Thus, all 19 questionnaire items measuring political involvement were deemed reliable.

Research Findings

The research findings indicate a predominant presence of female respondents in the study, accounting for 348 (68.8%), while males constitute 158 (31.2%). The age distribution of respondents is categorized into three groups: the majority, comprising 352 respondents (69.6%), falls within the '18 to 20 years' age range. This is followed by aged '21 to 22 years', making up 113 respondents (22.3%). The 23 years and above category comprises 41 respondent (8.1%). Moreover, the findings reveal that Islamic youths in Sarawak universities are primarily from the Malay, totaling 390 individuals (77.1%). Following this are the Melanau with 69 respondent (11.9%), and the 'other' ethnic category with 56 respondents (11.1%).

Regarding the respondents' highest level of education, a significant proportion of Sarawak university students participating in this study fall into the category of 'Diploma and Below' graduates, amounting to 358 respondents (70.8%). Meanwhile, students with a 'bachelor's degree and above' comprise 148 respondents (29.2%). Among the institutions of higher education included in this study, the highest number of respondents are from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), totaling 387 respondents (76.5%). Respondents from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) constitute 50 (9.9%), followed by Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) with 42 (8.3%).

Inferential Analysis (MANOVA)

The analysis of the relationship between student involvement in politics among university youths in Sarawak and the external factors influencing their political engagement is presented

in Table 1. All items have mean scores ranging from moderate to high, exceeding the minimum value of 2.5. The lowest minimum value is 3.41, while the highest is 3.93. Notably, the item 'Influence of Social Media' records the highest mean score (M=3.93, SD=0.885). Within this context, only 10 individuals (2%) strongly disagree with the statement, and 16 individuals (3.2%) hold a dissenting view. Similarly, the item 'Issues of Corruption, Cronyism, and Politics' registers the second-highest mean score (M=3.86, SD=0.907). A considerable portion of university youths in Sarawak, comprising 343 individuals (67.8%), support this statement, indicating that external factors such as corruption, cronyism, and political issues significantly influence their political engagement. However, only 7 individuals (1.4%) strongly disagree, while 25 individuals (4.9%) express disagreement.

On the other hand, the item 'Influence of External Politics' records the lowest mean score compared to other items, with a mean score of (M=3.41, SD=0.997). Here, 235 individuals (46.4%) acknowledge the role of external politics in shaping students' political engagement. Among them, 69 individuals (13.6%) strongly agree with this viewpoint. Conversely, 75 individuals reject the notion that external political influences affect students' political engagement in Sarawak, with 52 individuals (10.3%) expressing disagreement.

Table 1

Minimum Scores and Frequency Analysis of External Factors Influencing Sarawak University Muslim Students' Political Engagement from the Behavioral Aspect

Items	N	STS	TS	TP	S	SS	Min	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
External Political factors	506	23 4.5	52 10.3	196 38.7	166 32.8	69 13.6	3.41	0.997	Moderate
Bad economics and a high unemployment rate	505	6 1.2	26 5.1	135 26.7	225 44.5	113 22.3	3.82	0.879	High
Bribery, cronyism, and political issues	505	7 1.4	25 4.9	130 25.7	212 41.9	131 25.9	3.86	0.907	High
Unfair government administration	505	7 1.4	29 5.7	183 36.2	179 35.4	107 21.1	3.69	0.914	High
Social Media influence	504	10 2	16 3.2	109 21.5	235 46.4	134 26.5	3.93	0.885	High
Fighting of rights for religions and ethnics	503	12 2.4	27 5.3	148 29.2	197 38.9	119 23.5	3.76	0.952	Tinggi
Influence of family and friends	504	12 2.4	24 4.7	162 32	208 41.1	98 19.4	3.71	0.914	Tinggi

The findings indicate that student involvement remains at a low level, despite the recent amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act 2019, which allow campus youths to engage actively in both on-campus and off-campus politics. Although the Ministry of Education Malaysia Malaysia (2018) stated that amendments have abolished section 15(2)(C)

to provide more space and freedom for students to voice their opinions and engage in politics on campus, restrictions that disrupt public order, such as entering organizations that clearly contradict national laws, are still prohibited. This broadens the scope for university youths to participate, support, and even contest in elections. However, the brief timeframe poses challenges in shifting the mindset of youths accustomed to strict regulations. This underscores the need for initiatives to stimulate university youths' thinking, whether by the Ministry or any political party. The participation of university youths can reshape the existing political landscape due to their heightened idealism.

Lastly, the analysis of students' engagement in politics among university youths in Sarawak, based on their participation in both on-campus and off-campus politics, is presented in Table 2. All items show minimum scores at a low level, below the threshold of 2.5, with the lowest minimum value being 1.48 and the highest minimum value being 1.79. Notably, the item "I often attend political forums or dialogues" records a relatively high minimum score among the rest (M=1.79, SD=0.960), as depicted in Table 2. About 243 individuals (48%) of Sarawak students state "Never" and reject the assertion that they have never attended political forums or dialogues. Out of the 38 individuals, 31 individuals (6.1%) indicate "Frequently," while 7 individuals (1.4%) state "Very Frequently."

Similarly, the item "I have attended political meetings" records the lowest minimum score among the others (M=1.48, SD=0.852). A significant number of 357 individuals (70.6%) state "Never," refuting the notion that they have attended political meetings. This suggests that the majority of university students in Sarawak have never attended political party meetings. Only 18 individuals (3.6%) responded positively, indicating that they attended such meetings. Within this group, 13 individuals (2.6%) state "Frequently," and 5 individuals (1%) express "Very Frequently."

Table 2

Minimum Scores and Frequency Analysis of Sarawak University Students' Engagement in Off-Campus Politics from the Behavioral Aspect

Items	N	STS	TS	TP	S	SS	Min	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
I always attending political forum / dialogue	505	243	168	56	31	7	1.79	0.96	Low
I have attended courses organised by political party	505	327	97	52	24	5	1.58	0.925	Low
I have attended political party meeting	505	357	79	51	13	5	1.48	0.852	Low
I have attended political seminar/talk	505	304	97	61	36	7	1.7	1.023	Low
I have attended political party campaign	505	355	68	56	22	4	1.52	0.911	Low

The findings indicate that student engagement in politics remains at a low level, despite the recent amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act 2019, which permit campus youths to actively participate in both on-campus and off-campus politics. Although the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2018) stated that the amendments have repealed section 15(2)(C) to provide more room and freedom for students to express their opinions and engage in politics on campus, restrictions that disrupt public order, such as entering organizations that blatantly violate national laws, remain prohibited. This underscores the need for initiatives to stimulate the thinking of university youths, whether by the Ministry or any political party. The participation of university youths has the potential to reshape the existing political landscape due to their heightened idealism.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 3 reveals that the independent variable of current education level can account for 2.30% of the variance (Adjusted R squared) in 'factors influencing students' involvement in politics' (R squared = 0.025). The independent variable of current education level demonstrates a strong correlation in explaining the factors influencing students' involvement in politics, except for gender, age, ethnicity, and the highest educational institution. These variables are not significant and therefore cannot comprehensively and directly explain or predict their relationship with factors influencing students' involvement in politics. This suggests that there are 97.70% of other independent variables that could elucidate the factors influencing students' involvement in politics.

Furthermore, this analysis highlights that the current education level is associated with the dependent variable of factors influencing students' involvement in politics (p = 0.000). This directly signifies that the relationship between these variables is significant, with a probability value less than 0.05 (p < 0.05), and the relationship is positive (Standard Coefficients = 0.159). On the contrary, gender, age, ethnicity, and the highest educational institution display insignificant relationships with factors influencing students' involvement in politics. This implies that higher levels of the current education variable correspond to higher levels of the dependent variable. This observation also implies that students with education levels of Bachelor's degree and above tend to exhibit a more favorable attitude towards factors influencing students' involvement in politics.

Table 3

Regression Analysis Results and Model Analysis for the Independent Variable of Current Education Level and Factors Influencing Student Involvement in Politics.

MODEL		EXTERNAL FACTOR INVOLVEMENT OF STUDENT IN POLITIC	
		(Constant)	Recent Education Level
Unstandardized	B	3.418	0.249
Coefficients	Std. Error	0.094	0.069
Standardized	Beta		0.159
Coefficients			
T		36.307	3.618
SIG.		0.000	0.000
Collinearity Statistics	Tolerance		1.000
	VIF		1.000
R			0.159 ^a

R Square		0.025
Adjusted R Square		0.023
Std. Error Of The Estimate		0.7031
Change Statistics	R Square Change	0.025
	F Change	13.093
	Df1	1
	Df2	504
	Sig. F Change	0.000

Conclusion

This study addresses the relationship between the current education level and student involvement in politics. The results indicate that the current education level significantly influences student involvement in politics. Higher education levels have a positive impact on factors influencing student political engagement. Therefore, authorities should encourage students with lower education levels to pursue higher education, thereby exposing them to political matters, both internal and external.

The study found that the involvement of Islamic students in politics, both on and off-campus, is quite low. This is supported by the pairwise min results, which show that Islamic students in Sarawak exhibit uniformity in their political involvement, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, education level, and higher education institution. Understanding and delving into the intricacies of student political engagement in Malaysia carry paramount importance, resonating across multiple dimensions and stakeholders.

This study is crucial for empowering the youth, who represent the future of the nation. By uncovering the challenges and opportunities faced by students in participating politically, researchers pave the way for informed interventions that can enhance youth political literacy, awareness, and participation. This empowerment not only strengthens democratic values but also cultivates a sense of civic responsibility among the younger generation.

Moreover, the study of student political engagement holds profound implications for Malaysia's democratic landscape. By scrutinizing the legal constraints, such as the Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU), researchers shed light on mechanisms that either inhibit or foster democratic principles within educational institutions. This knowledge is indispensable for policymakers, activists, and educators alike, guiding efforts to enact legislative reforms that uphold academic freedom and students' rights to expression and political participation.

Furthermore, understanding the motivations and perspectives of students as political stakeholders enriches the discourse surrounding governance and policy-making. By recognizing students as active participants in shaping the nation's political trajectory, policymakers gain valuable insights into the aspirations, concerns, and priorities of this demographic group. This, in turn, facilitates the formulation of inclusive and responsive governance agendas that reflect the diverse needs of Malaysian society.

In essence, the study of student political engagement transcends academic inquiry; it is a catalyst for societal transformation and democratic renewal. By investing in research and initiatives that amplify youth voices, Malaysia can harness the full potential of its young population to drive positive change, foster a vibrant democracy, and chart a course towards a more equitable and prosperous future. Thus, the imperative of studying this topic lies not

only in its academic merits but also in its profound implications for Malaysia's democratic development and societal well-being.

Referring to the limitations of the study, certain independent variables like age, ethnicity, and higher education institution did not significantly influence the dependent variable. This is due to the relatively narrow age range among the respondents, as university students in Malaysia generally fall within a similar age range. The study suggests that future research should diversify the age categories to account for potential variations in political behavior.

Moreover, the study primarily focused on Islamic students, with the majority being of Malay ethnicity. The number of non-Malay ethnicities within the Islamic student group was limited. Future studies should explore the differences in political engagement between Islamic and non-Islamic students.

Lastly, the study encountered limited response rates from students at other universities apart from UiTM due to their lack of cooperation and bureaucratic issues. To address this, increasing the available grant funds is suggested. This would facilitate researchers in obtaining paid access to respondents through programs like Talk Shows, workshops, and lectures.

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