

Towards a More Asymmetrical Federation: Sarawak Regionalism and the Future of Malaysian Federalism

Ivy Anak Jugah^{1*}, Arnold Puyok²

¹Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: ivyjugah@uitm.edu.my

²Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: parnold@unimas.my

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):

Ivy Anak Jugah
(ivyjugah@uitm.edu.my)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Sarawak's post-2018 regionalism as a structurally significant driver of change in Malaysian federalism. Drawing on qualitative elite interview data from five key participants in the political, legal, and legislative domains, corroborated by official government and primary documentary sources spanning the period 2018 to 2026, the article argues that Sarawak's regionalism is contributing to a gradual shift towards a more negotiated and asymmetrical form of Malaysian federalism, characterised by incremental fiscal, resource, and administrative devolution within the Federation rather than comprehensive decentralisation or separation. Three core findings organise the analysis: first, greater autonomy is being achieved through incremental asymmetrical devolution of fiscal and resource powers; second, negotiation, encompassing federal-state bargaining, coalition leverage, and selective legal action, functions as the primary pathway; and third, the sustainability of these gains is conditioned on constitutional durability, governing capacity, development performance, and a transition beyond grievance-based regionalism. The article advances the concept of 'negotiated centralism' as a theoretically grounded account of how a sub-state region achieves meaningful asymmetrical gains within a formally centralised federal structure, without triggering comprehensive decentralisation or separation. An original 'constitutional covenant' framing of the Malaysia Agreement 1963 is also offered, positioning MA63 as a living constitutional framework for federal-state relations rather than a historical grievance.

1. Introduction

Malaysia's federal system has long been characterised by a pronounced degree of centralisation. Since independence in 1957, and accelerated by the constitutional consolidation of the 1960s and 1970s, fiscal resources, administrative authority, and legislative competence have been concentrated at the federal level in Putrajaya, leaving

the thirteen constituent states with limited autonomous capacity. Scholars of Malaysian constitutionalism have consistently observed that the formal federal architecture, while structurally pluralist, operates in practice as a functionally centralised system (Harding, 2012; Watts, 2008). Yet from 2018 onwards, this centralising logic has been subject to sustained and structurally significant contestation from Sarawak, the largest state in the federation by land area and one endowed with distinctive constitutional foundations under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63).

The 2018 general election (GE14), which ended six decades of Barisan Nasional federal dominance, transformed the political landscape in ways that materially altered Sarawak's bargaining position. The Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) coalition, which had declined to join Pakatan Harapan's federal government, emerged as an indispensable parliamentary bloc whose support became central to federal coalition arithmetic, a structural position it maintained through the Sheraton Move of 2020, the formation of successive Perikatan Nasional administrations, and the GE15 election of November 2022. This sustained leverage created conditions for a qualitatively new phase of Sarawak's engagement with the federal government: not episodic grievance politics, but institutionalised negotiation over concrete constitutional, fiscal, and resource outcomes.

This article argues that Sarawak's regionalism over this period is contributing to a gradual shift towards a more negotiated and asymmetrical form of Malaysian federalism, characterised by incremental fiscal, resource, and administrative devolution within the Federation rather than comprehensive decentralisation or separation. This argument is advanced through the concept of 'negotiated centralism': a mode of federal reconfiguration in which a sub-state region achieves meaningful asymmetrical gains through sustained bargaining within a formally centralised structure, without displacing the centralising logic of the system as a whole. As a theoretical contribution, 'negotiated centralism' offers a more precise analytical category than existing accounts of decentralisation or contested federalism for cases in which incremental, politically contingent, and asymmetrical gains are achieved within a formally centralised federal architecture, a pattern with potential applicability beyond the Malaysian case to other asymmetrical federal systems in the Southeast Asian region. The article also advances an original 'constitutional covenant' framing of MA63, positioning the agreement not as a historical grievance to be remedied but as a living constitutional framework that confers legitimate entitlements and structures ongoing federal-state relations.

The analysis is organised around three core findings. First, Sarawak has secured incremental autonomy through asymmetric devolution, particularly in fiscal, resource, constitutional, and administrative matters. Second, these gains have been achieved primarily through federal-state negotiation, supported by political leverage and selective legal action. Third, their long-term sustainability depends on constitutional durability, governing capacity, development performance, and the institutionalisation of regionalism beyond grievance-based mobilisation.

The article draws on qualitative elite interviews with five key participants from the political, legal, and legislative domains, supported by official government documents and other primary sources covering developments between 2018 and 2026.

Accordingly, the article has three interrelated objectives: to examine the nature and extent of fiscal, resource, and administrative devolution achieved by Sarawak; to analyse the negotiation strategies and political mechanisms used to pursue greater autonomy;

and to assess the structural conditions that shape the sustainability of these gains. These objectives correspond directly to the three core findings presented in the Results section. The concept of negotiated centralism is developed in the Discussion as a theoretical synthesis of these empirical findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Asymmetrical Federalism and Negotiated Autonomy

The study of asymmetrical federalism has generated a substantial body of comparative literature addressing the conditions under which federal systems formally or informally differentiate the rights, competences, and arrangements of constituent units. Watts (2008) provides a foundational typology, demonstrating that asymmetry is a common and normatively defensible feature of federal and quasi-federal arrangements rather than a pathological deviation. Stepan, Linz, and Yadav (2011) extend this in their account of 'state-nations': multi-national polities that accommodate diversity through differentiated constitutional arrangements rather than uniform nation-state integration, finding that asymmetrical accommodation institutionalised through durable constitutional frameworks constitutes a viable long-run strategy for managing sub-state regionalism.

Recent scholarship has extended this foundational work in directions directly relevant to the Sarawak case. Blöchliger and Montes-Nebreda (2024) demonstrate that diversity and asymmetrical arrangements function as drivers of fiscal federalism across a comparative sample of decentralised states, finding that asymmetrical fiscal arrangements are most durable when anchored in constitutional provisions rather than negotiated administrative settlements. Bhattacharyya (2023) provides a conceptual treatment of asymmetric federalism as a politics of recognition, arguing that sub-state claims grounded in historical compacts and indigenous identity carry a distinct normative weight that differentiates them from ordinary distributive demands — a framework that resonates directly with Sarawak's constitutional covenant claims under MA63. Arban (2023) further theorises the relationship between federalism, regionalism, and sub-state nationalism, arguing that asymmetrical arrangements emerge not from federal design but from sustained sub-state pressure on centralised systems over time.

Hueglin and Fenna (2015) situate asymmetrical federalism within a broader account of federal bargaining, arguing that federalism is best understood as a process of ongoing negotiation among constituent units rather than a static distribution of powers. This processual view is directly relevant to the Sarawak case: the gains examined in this article were not delivered by constitutional design but negotiated through sustained political engagement over an extended period. The Malaysian case exemplifies what Hueglin and Fenna (2015) term 'executive federalism', the management of intergovernmental relations through political bargaining at the executive level rather than through judicial or legislative channels. Moland (2024) adds a public opinion dimension, demonstrating that a history of voluntary asymmetric arrangements generates popular expectations of further asymmetry — a finding that anticipates the difficulty of reversing Sarawak's negotiated gains once institutionalised.

2.2. New Regionalism and Sub-State Identity Politics

Keating's (2013) account of the 'new regionalism' offers a second theoretical anchor. Keating argues that contemporary sub-state regionalism is distinguished from earlier redistributive demands by its focus on competitive capacity, institutional autonomy, and the construction of distinctive political identities. Regional movements in this mode seek not merely a larger share of federal transfers but the institutional conditions for self-directed development. This transformation, specifically the shift from demand-making to capacity-building, characterises GPS's trajectory in the post-GE14 period. Where earlier Sarawak regionalism operated primarily through the articulation of MA63-related grievances within the BN federal framework, the post-2018 phase has been marked by the construction of institutional capacity alongside continued negotiation over constitutional and fiscal entitlements.

The comparative literature on new regionalism has evolved considerably since Keating's foundational formulation. Keating (2022) revisits the concept in the context of Brexit and UK devolution, demonstrating that new regionalism is not a linear progression but a contested, reversible process shaped by the broader constitutional environment within which sub-state actors operate. This qualification is significant for the Sarawak case: the gains documented in this article are achievements of the new regionalist mode, but they remain contingent on the continuation of the political and constitutional conditions that enabled them. Jeffery (2009; 2010) further develops the territorial politics dimension, arguing that subnational political parties and coalitions function as critical intermediaries between regional identity and federal bargaining outcomes, a role that GPS has performed with effectiveness in the post-GE14 period. More recently, the *Regional and Federal Studies* editorial review of emerging themes by Dardanelli et al. (2023) identifies the intersection of authoritarianism, democracy, and centralisation as a defining challenge for regionalist movements in the 2020s, a challenge Sarawak has navigated by maintaining cooperative engagement with successive federal governments of varying political orientations.

Keating's (2013) framework also illuminates the internal political logic of GPS's regionalism. The coalition's ability to sustain a coherent Sarawakian political identity, distinct from Peninsular Malaysia's ethnic-party politics, provides the political foundation for its bargaining posture at the federal level. Regionalism, on this account, is not merely an instrumental strategy for extracting resources from the centre; it is a mode of political identity construction that generates the legitimacy and durability of sub-state claims. Arban (2023) reinforces this point, observing that sub-state regionalism sustains its political salience over time when it is grounded in a distinctive identity claim rather than purely distributive demands, which helps explain why Sarawak's regional agenda retains broad popular support even as the specific content of its claims shifts from constitutional recognition to fiscal and resource autonomy.

2.3. Dynamic Federalism and Institutional Change

Popelier's (2021) concept of dynamic federalism provides a useful framework for understanding federalism as an evolving institutional arrangement rather than a fixed constitutional structure. The balance between regional autonomy and federal cohesion may change over time through constitutional amendments, legislation, fiscal arrangements, intergovernmental negotiation, judicial interpretation, and administrative practices. As a result, the effective distribution of authority can shift even

when the formal federal structure remains largely unchanged. This distinction between *de jure* powers and *de facto* autonomy is supported by Yimenu (2023), who shows that regional autonomy may vary according to political relationships, institutional capacity, and policy priorities. Sharma and Swenden (2022) similarly demonstrate that federal relations are shaped by negotiated cooperation between central and subnational governments.

To explain how such gradual changes occur, this article also draws on Mahoney and Thelen's (2010) theory of gradual institutional change. Their framework shows that institutions may evolve incrementally through mechanisms such as layering, where new rules or arrangements are added to existing institutions, and conversion, where existing rules or institutions are redirected towards new purposes. Broschek (2024) demonstrates the relevance of these mechanisms in federal systems by showing how subnational governments in Canada and Germany expanded their influence through incremental institutional adaptation. Such changes may increase subnational authority without formally replacing the existing constitutional framework.

The effectiveness and durability of these changes also depend on subnational governing capacity. Yimenu (2023) and Moffitt et al. (2023) show that formal decentralisation alone does not guarantee meaningful autonomy; subnational governments must also possess sufficient administrative, fiscal, and institutional capacity to exercise newly acquired responsibilities. This is particularly relevant to Malaysia, where Sabah and Sarawak already occupy an asymmetrical constitutional position (Ismail & Yusoff, 2022). In Sarawak, recent developments in areas such as educational governance further illustrate how practical autonomy may expand incrementally within a still highly centralised federal system (Mozihim & Anwar, 2025).

This framework is therefore well suited to analysing Sarawak's autonomy between 2018 and 2026. Changes in constitutional recognition, fiscal arrangements, administrative delegation, federal-state negotiation, and resource governance can be understood as forms of layering and conversion that gradually modify the federal balance. Popelier (2021) explains the broader evolution of federal relations, while Mahoney and Thelen (2010) identify the mechanisms through which institutional change occurs. Together, these perspectives help explain how Sarawak's autonomy has expanded incrementally without fundamentally replacing Malaysia's existing federal structure.

2.4. Malaysian Federalism and the Borneo States: Identifying the Gap

The literature on Malaysian federalism has documented the system's centralising tendencies with considerable analytical rigour (Harding, 2012). Sarawak and Sabah occupy distinctive constitutional positions because they entered the federation through MA63 with differentiated safeguards and powers. Recent studies have examined the resurgence of regional coalitions and the divergent autonomy trajectories of the two Borneo states (Puyok, 2024; Puyok & Naim, 2023). However, less attention has been paid to how Sarawak's post-2018 bargaining has cumulatively altered the operation of federalism while leaving its centralised structure largely intact.

This article addresses that gap by providing a sustained analytical account of the post-2018 period as a phase of structural rather than episodic federal reconfiguration. It does so through the lens of 'negotiated centralism': a concept that captures the distinctive mode through which Sarawak's regionalism has operated and that contributes a new

analytical category to the comparative literature on asymmetrical federalism in the Southeast Asian context.

Yeoh (2024) provides important contextualisation of the political and fiscal dynamics shaping this relationship. Drawing on an analysis of federal-state relations under the Madani administration, Yeoh observes that progress on MA63 implementation has been most forthcoming for Sabah and Sarawak precisely because GPS's support is indispensable to the federal coalition's parliamentary majority, a structural condition that has generated a qualitatively different negotiating environment for the Borneo states than for their Peninsular counterparts. Yeoh (2020) had earlier documented the institutional and financial mechanisms through which the federal centre had systematically concentrated power at the expense of the states, providing the historical baseline against which the post-2018 reconfiguration documented in this article should be read. Wan Zahari and Shuaib (2020) further illuminate the petroleum dimension by demonstrating how the centralization of petroleum ownership and regulatory authority under the Petroleum Development Act 1974 created the institutional foundations for subsequent federal-state contestation, including the PETROS–PETRONAS dispute.

3. Research Methods

This article adopts a qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2018), treating Sarawak as a theoretically significant bounded case whose post-2018 engagement with the federal government provides an analytically productive setting for examining negotiated asymmetrical federalism within its political, constitutional, and institutional context. The study is interpretivist in orientation, examining how political, legal, and civil-society actors understand and construct the processes of federal-state renegotiation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Five participants representing political, legal, and civil-society perspectives were selected through purposive criterion sampling, requiring direct involvement in or specialised knowledge of Sarawak's constitutional position, MA63 negotiations, or federal-state relations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saunders et al., 2018). Primary data were generated through individual semi-structured elite interviews conducted between 2022 and 2023, each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Leech, 2002). Participants are identified as Participant 1 to Participant 5; quotations are reproduced verbatim, italicised, and placed in quotation marks. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection and informed consent was secured from each participant prior to interview.

Interview evidence was supplemented by qualitative document analysis of official government records, parliamentary documents, legislation, policy statements, and institutional reports covering the period 2018 to September 2026, with priority accorded to primary and official sources (Bowen, 2009). Interview transcripts were analysed through researcher-led reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022), with initial coding remaining open to participants' meanings before the theoretical frameworks of Keating (2013), Popelier (2021), and Mahoney and Thelen (2010) informed the interpretive stage. Documentary evidence was subsequently mapped against the emergent themes to corroborate, contextualise, or qualify interview accounts.

4. Results

The analysis identified three core findings: Sarawak's autonomy has expanded through incremental asymmetrical devolution; these gains have been achieved mainly through negotiation, political leverage, and selective legal action; and their sustainability depends on institutional durability, governing capacity, development performance, and institutionalised regionalism.

4.1. Greater Autonomy Through Incremental Asymmetrical Devolution

The first finding concerns the nature and extent of Sarawak's autonomy gains between 2018 and 2026. Table 1 classifies the principal developments according to their institutional significance. The evidence shows meaningful but selective change within Malaysia rather than comprehensive decentralisation or movement towards separation.

Table 1: Chronology of Key Devolutionary Outcomes in Sarawak (2018–2026)

Year / Date	Key Development	Analytical Significance
2018	The Special Cabinet Committee on MA63 began a renewed federal review of outstanding matters.	Structured intergovernmental negotiation resumed after GE14.
2019–2020	Sarawak imposed a 5% State Sales Tax on petroleum products; the Kuching High Court upheld the state's authority on 13 March 2020.	Judicial confirmation and enforcement of an asserted state taxing authority, rather than devolution of a new federal power.
2021–2022	The Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2021 was passed in December 2021 and enacted as the Constitution (Amendment) Act 2022 (Act A1642), commencing on 11 February 2022.	Strengthened constitutional recognition without comprehensively transferring legislative or administrative powers.
2023	The Federal Government expanded Sabah and Sarawak's role in implementing federally funded projects costing below RM50 million, subject to federal financial regulations.	Administrative decentralisation, not fiscal ownership or full devolution.
2024	Federal-state negotiations expanded Sarawak's administrative participation in selected education matters.	Partial administrative decentralisation; education remained on the Federal List.
2025	Sarawak's Article 112D special grant increased to RM600 million on an interim basis.	Substantive fiscal adjustment, but not a permanent settlement formula.
January 2026	PETRONAS sought Federal Court clarification on the regulatory framework applicable to its Sarawak operations; the MA63 Dashboard was also launched.	Petroleum jurisdiction remained contested, while monitoring transparency increased.

Year / Date	Key Development	Analytical Significance
June 2026	Bintulu Port was formally transferred to Sarawak following legislative measures and a RM1.8 billion settlement.	Completed statutory and administrative transfer.
September 2026	The permanent Article 112D calculation formula remained under federal-state negotiation.	Continuing uncertainty over long-term fiscal institutionalisation.

The developments in Table 1 represented different forms and degrees of devolution. The constitutional amendment strengthened formal recognition; the petroleum State Sales Tax confirmed state authority through judicial action; the education and project-implementation arrangements expanded administrative participation; the Article 112D increase remained an interim financial arrangement; and the transfer of Bintulu Port constituted a completed institutional transfer. Collectively, these developments gradually strengthened Sarawak's distinct position within a federal system that remained structurally centralized.

Participants anchored this trajectory in Sarawak's founding constitutional bargain. Participant 1 explicitly distinguished autonomy from separation:

"The people of Sarawak today want Sarawak to be part of Malaysia."

Participant 1 further grounded the rights agenda in MA63's original conditionality:

"Sarawakians wanted to have some degree of autonomy. They agreed to join the new Federation provided that there were constitutional safeguards."

Participant 3 offered an important qualification, arguing that MA63 provides a foundation rather than a complete framework for Sarawak's contemporary needs:

"MA63 is fundamental, is important, but it is not everything. It is just a foundation. It does not encompass everything that we need."

The resource dimension of devolution generated the clearest participant responses. Participant 5 directly anticipated the Petros outcome, connecting resource control to fiscal self-reliance:

"Sarawak is continuing to pursue the gas aggregator role. It could provide a substantial amount of additional revenue. With sufficient revenue, Sarawak can develop itself without waiting for the federal government."

"The areas being reclaimed are closely related to the fundamental sources of Sarawak's income."

Participant 4 captured the distributive stakes underlying all resource negotiations:

"The federal government and PETRONAS depend heavily on petroleum revenue. The challenge is how the economic cake should be divided."

The education devolution agreed in May 2024 (Table1) illustrates the same pattern: administrative decentralisation rather than full legislative transfer. Participant 5 framed the developmental case for this directly:

"We cannot depend on policies that change whenever the minister or government changes. Such instability can jeopardise the development of our human capital. We need a different approach to educate our children. The objective is to create skilled manpower capable of leading the state."

Consistent with Popelier's (2021) dynamic federalism framework, the reconfiguration documented in Table 4.1 proceeded not through comprehensive constitutional reform but through a succession of incremental institutional adjustments that cumulatively altered the effective distribution of fiscal and resource authority between Kuala Lumpur and Kuching.

4.2. Negotiation as the Main Pathway

The second finding concerns how these gains were pursued. Table 2 summarises the changing negotiation environment and the principal institutional and legal mechanisms. Across the period, negotiation remained the main pathway, supported by parliamentary leverage, technical expertise and selective recourse to legal clarification.

Table 2: Chronology of Key Negotiation Milestones and Legal Actions (2018–2026)

Period	Negotiation or Legal Development	Outcome
2018-2019	The Special Cabinet Committee reviewed outstanding MA63 matters.	MA63 claims entered a renewed formal intergovernmental process.
2020-2022	Federal coalition instability increased GPS's parliamentary leverage across successive administrations.	Political access and bargaining influence expanded.
November 2022	GE15 produced a hung parliament; GPS supported the Unity Government.	GPS became a pivotal coalition partner in federal government formation.
2023 onwards	The MA63 Implementation Action Council and its technical arrangements structured negotiations.	Political claims were increasingly channelled through regular executive and technical processes.
2024-2025	Negotiations produced selected administrative and fiscal adjustments, including education participation and the interim special grant.	Incremental gains were achieved without comprehensive constitutional redistribution.
January 2026	PETRONAS applied to the Federal Court for clarification of the petroleum regulatory framework in Sarawak.	Legal proceedings demonstrated unresolved jurisdictional overlap.

Period	Negotiation or Legal Development	Outcome
28 January 2026	The Federal Government launched the MA63 Dashboard.	Public monitoring improved, although classification as resolved did not necessarily amount to legislative devolution.
June 2026	The Bintulu Port transfer was completed through legislation, agreements and a financial settlement.	Negotiation produced a comparatively durable institutional transfer.

Table 2 shows that political opportunity alone did not produce institutional change. Federal coalition fragmentation increased the value of GPS support, but gains were translated through structured councils, technical engagement and legally defined arrangements. Legal proceedings emerged where petroleum jurisdiction remained unsettled, functioning as a complement to bargaining rather than replacing negotiation as the dominant approach.

Participant 5 identified the professionalisation of Sarawak's bargaining capacity as the most important institutional development of the period:

"Constitutional experts and lawyers studied MA63 and the IGC Report. The experts identified economic and constitutional areas that Sarawak could reclaim."

Participant 2 emphasised that asserting Sarawak's rights and maintaining federal cooperation were not contradictory objectives:

"We must ensure a good relationship with the federal government."

Participant 3 reframed the negotiation agenda as a collective federal improvement rather than a zero-sum transfer:

"How can we prosper together as a region and as Malaysia?"

On the legal pathway, Participant 4 articulated a deliberate sequencing model in which litigation strengthens the subsequent negotiation position:

"If [the Petroleum Development Act] were successfully challenged, Sarawak could regain greater control over petroleum resources. After obtaining a legal decision, Sarawak could negotiate with the federal government."

"Amendment of the Federal Constitution is possible. Devolution should not depend only on temporary administrative decisions."

The legal developments surrounding petroleum governance show that litigation operates as a complement to negotiation when statutory or constitutional authority remains disputed. The January 2026 application by PETRONAS for Federal Court clarification demonstrated that the regulatory relationship between PETRONAS and PETROS had not been fully settled. This dual pathway is consistent with a bargaining process in which legal clarification may strengthen or delimit subsequent political negotiation.

4.3. Conditions for Sustainable Autonomy

The third finding concerns the conditions under which Sarawak's autonomy gains may become durable rather than remain dependent on temporary political circumstances. Four interrelated conditions emerged from the interview and documentary evidence: legal and constitutional protection, governing capacity, development performance, and the transition from grievance-based mobilisation towards institutionally grounded regionalism.

4.3.1. Legal and Constitutional Protection

The first condition is the extent to which negotiated gains are protected through durable legal or constitutional arrangements. Participant 4 identified the vulnerability of relying principally on administrative decisions:

“Amendment of the Federal Constitution is possible. Devolution should not depend only on temporary administrative decisions.”

This concern is supported by the distinction between constitutional recognition and the transfer of substantive authority. The Constitution (Amendment) Act 2022 strengthened recognition of the circumstances surrounding the formation of Malaysia and the distinctive position of Sabah and Sarawak. However, it did not independently redistribute legislative responsibilities. Subsequent changes involving education, infrastructure implementation and resource governance have largely proceeded through administrative arrangements, legislation and intergovernmental agreements.

The Article 112D special grant illustrates this limitation. Sarawak's annual interim grant increased to RM600 million from 2025, but as of September 2026 the federal and Sarawak governments had not agreed on a permanent calculation formula. Sarawak had proposed a revenue-based mechanism, but adoption remained subject to federal decision and continuing negotiation (Chandra, 2026). The increased payment represents a fiscal gain, while the absence of a permanent formula demonstrates continuing institutional uncertainty.

Durability therefore depends not only on obtaining a concession but also on the legal form through which it is implemented. Constitutional provisions and legislation generally provide stronger protection than Cabinet decisions, administrative directives or time-limited fiscal arrangements. Constitutional entrenchment is not necessarily appropriate for every administrative responsibility; binding intergovernmental agreements and transparent implementation procedures may also provide practical stability.

4.3.2. Governing and Administrative Capacity

The second condition is Sarawak's capacity to exercise expanded authority effectively. Participant 3 connected demands for autonomy with the responsibility to demonstrate strategic direction:

“Sabah and Sarawak also need to show vision and have plans moving Sarawak forward.”

Participant 5 similarly associated greater fiscal authority with the capacity to finance development independently:

"With sufficient revenue, Sarawak can develop itself without waiting for the federal government."

These accounts indicate that autonomy was not viewed solely as the recovery of constitutional rights. It was also understood as an obligation to develop the institutions, expertise and financial systems required to administer additional responsibilities. Expanded authority requires trained personnel, regulatory competence, financial accountability and coordination between state and federal agencies.

The development of specialised institutions and technical expertise suggests that this capacity is being strengthened. PETROS illustrates an institution created to increase Sarawak's commercial and regulatory participation in the energy sector. Legal and administrative expertise within the Sarawak Government has also supported increasingly technical MA63 negotiations. Institutional expansion, however, does not itself demonstrate complete capacity; effectiveness must be assessed through transparency, service delivery, regulatory performance and public accountability.

4.3.3. Development Performance

The third condition is whether greater fiscal and administrative authority produces tangible development outcomes. Participant 2 connected Sarawak's resource claims directly to development needs:

"Yes, especially on mineral resources and we need money to develop the state."

The documentary evidence indicates that Sarawak expanded its revenue base and development expenditure during the study period. State-led strategies also emphasised infrastructure, renewable energy, industrial development, digitalisation and human-capital formation. These developments provide a stronger financial and institutional foundation for arguments that Sarawak can exercise greater authority.

Aggregate revenue growth and headline economic indicators should not be treated as sufficient evidence of successful autonomy. Sustainable regionalism requires improvements in service quality, rural infrastructure, educational opportunity, household welfare and territorial equality. Development performance is therefore both a justification for greater autonomy and a mechanism through which the legitimacy of regional claims is evaluated.

4.3.4. Institutionalisation Beyond Grievance-Based Regionalism

The fourth condition concerns the political basis of Sarawak's regionalism. Historical and constitutional grievances have mobilised support for MA63-related claims. Participant 3 nevertheless questioned whether grievance and identity narratives alone could sustain the regional agenda:

"There is only so much you can use it as a political narrative, but once it is over, what is next? Whether it is beneficial in the long term is something that I question. We cannot just hop on regional narratives all the time. It is the same lens as racial and religious

narratives. We need to find ways to reposition ourselves to not focus on identity politics but rather economic politics."

The participant further argued that regional mobilisation might decline if development became more equitable across the Federation:

"If ... they can find an equitable way of allowing all regions to prosper together, such regionalism may decrease. If Sabah and Sarawak continue to play on the political narrative for their benefit ... we may see some level of continuation."

These observations distinguish between regionalism as a response to unresolved inequality and regionalism as a political strategy that may continue after particular claims have been addressed. A sustainable autonomy agenda therefore requires a transition from repeated historical grievance towards the accountable institutional use of additional authority. Constitutional history and Sarawakian identity remain relevant, but they must be connected to policy innovation and measurable development outcomes.

Keating's (2013) account of new regionalism helps explain this transition. Contemporary regionalism becomes institutionally significant when territorial identity supports governing capacity and regionally directed economic strategies. Sarawak's development planning and institution-building indicate movement in this direction, although rights-based claims and performance-based regionalism continue to operate simultaneously.

Table 3. Conditions Affecting the Sustainability of Sarawak's Autonomy Gains

Condition	Supporting Evidence	Continuing Limitation
Legal and constitutional protection	Constitutional recognition, legislation and negotiated arrangements strengthened Sarawak's position.	Several sectoral gains remain administratively based, interim or subject to negotiation.
Governing capacity	Specialised state institutions, technical expertise and an expanded fiscal base support additional responsibilities.	Institutional expansion must be accompanied by transparency, coordination and accountability.
Development performance	Revenue growth and development-oriented policies support state-led development.	Aggregate fiscal growth does not necessarily demonstrate equitable outcomes for all communities.
Institutionalisation beyond grievance	Regional claims are increasingly connected to planning, resource governance and capacity.	Historical grievance and identity mobilisation may overshadow performance-based evaluation.

The four conditions are interconnected, with each strengthening the effectiveness and sustainability of the others. Durable legal arrangements provide authority, governing capacity enables that authority to be exercised, development performance establishes practical legitimacy, and institutionalization reduces dependence on temporary political mobilization. The findings do not suggest that Sarawak's autonomy gains are permanent or irreversible. Rather, the sustainability of these gains depends on stable legal

arrangements, capable institutions and demonstrable public benefits. This conditionality constitutes the substantive limit of negotiated centralism.

4.4. Discussion

4.4.1. *Negotiated Centralism as a Mode of Federal Change*

The findings indicate that Sarawak's post-2018 regionalism has changed the operation of Malaysian federalism more extensively than its constitutional structure. Constitutional recognition, fiscal adjustments, expanded administrative participation and resource-related claims have widened Sarawak's practical room for action, yet the principal distribution of legislative and fiscal authority remains weighted towards the Federal Government. The case therefore represents territorial differentiation within a centralised federation rather than a transition to general decentralisation. This interpretation is consistent with Yeoh's (2024) observation that Malaysian states are applying stronger pressure for policy autonomy and fiscal transfers even though federal institutions retain structural dominance.

Negotiated centralism explains this coexistence of movement and continuity. It refers to a process through which a sub-state government obtains selective powers, resources or implementation responsibilities by sustained bargaining without displacing the centralised foundations of the federation. Four elements are connected in this process. Political leverage creates access to bargaining; Sarawak's distinctive constitutional history legitimises differentiated treatment; legal, fiscal and administrative capacity converts broad claims into implementable proposals; and the legal form of each agreement determines whether the outcome survives the political conditions that produced it. The concept therefore concerns not negotiation alone, but the conversion of contingent influence into uneven institutional change.

This interpretation extends rather than replaces existing approaches. Dynamic federalism explains how the effective distribution of authority can evolve through political, administrative and legal adaptation despite limited constitutional restructuring (Popelier, 2021). Asymmetrical federalism identifies the differentiated status of constituent units, while executive federalism directs attention to bargaining among governments (Hueglin & Fenna, 2015; Watts, 2008). Gradual institutional change further explains how cumulative adjustments can modify a system without formally replacing it (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Negotiated centralism connects these insights through a causal sequence: regional political cohesion and federal coalition dependence open an opportunity; institutional resources shape the content of the claim; and legal or administrative mechanisms convert the negotiated outcome into practice.

The concept has clear boundaries. Intergovernmental bargaining occurs in all federations, and a single concession would not establish negotiated centralism. It is analytically useful where repeated bargaining produces differentiated outcomes, those outcomes remain closely associated with the regional government's political leverage, and the wider federal allocation of authority remains substantially intact. It is also distinct from comprehensive devolution because the centre retains the capacity to define the scope, financing and conditions of many transferred responsibilities. Negotiated centralism consequently captures both Sarawak's agency and the continuing structural advantage of the Federal Government.

The wider significance is that Malaysian federal change need not occur uniformly. Sarawak's experience demonstrates that a centralised federation can respond to territorial demands through sector-specific adjustments. Such flexibility may reduce conflict by allowing different arrangements for historically distinct units. However, it can also produce an uneven and opaque system if each outcome depends on temporary bargaining power rather than publicly stated principles. Negotiated centralism should therefore be understood simultaneously as an adaptive mechanism and as evidence that more predictable intergovernmental rules remain underdeveloped.

4.4.2. From Political Leverage to Institutional Change

Federal political fragmentation created an important opportunity for Sarawak, but it was not a sufficient explanation for the gains identified in this study. Puyok and Naim (2023) show that the resurgence of regional coalitions following the 2018 and 2022 general elections increased the importance of Sarawak- and Sabah-based parties in federal coalition formation. The interview evidence supports this assessment but adds that parliamentary relevance was productive only when it could be converted into specific, technically defensible demands. GPS's influence secured access to federal decision-making, while Sarawak's legal expertise, fiscal base and specialised institutions increased its ability to negotiate the details of implementation.

This interaction helps explain why leverage and capacity should not be treated as competing explanations. Political leverage influenced the Federal Government's willingness to negotiate, whereas institutional capacity affected the precision, feasibility and durability of the outcomes obtained. Claims involving petroleum regulation, infrastructure implementation and fiscal entitlements required more than a general assertion of MA63 rights. They required statutory interpretation, revenue analysis, administrative systems and agencies capable of assuming new responsibilities. Where such capacity was visible, Sarawak could present devolution not only as a constitutional demand but also as an administratively credible option.

Comparison with Sabah strengthens this interpretation. Puyok (2024) attributes the different autonomy trajectories of Sarawak and Sabah to differences in historical development, the degree of political control exercised by state-based parties and the priorities of state leadership. Sarawak's experience therefore cannot be reduced to a strategy that any Malaysian state can reproduce through electoral pressure. Its bargaining position combines Malaysia's 1963 formation arrangements with sustained regional coalition cohesion and a comparatively strong state institutional base. Asymmetry is thus not merely inherited from the constitutional settlement; it is continually reproduced through differences in regional political organisation and governing capacity.

Hutchinson and Lee (2025) likewise argue that Sarawak has used favourable federal-state dynamics to advance autonomy and economic influence. The present findings qualify this conclusion by separating acquisition from institutionalisation. Coalition leverage can secure an agreement or accelerate a negotiation, but it does not by itself ensure that a responsibility is adequately financed, legally protected or administratively workable. The movement from political access to durable institutional change is therefore the critical point at which negotiated gains may either consolidate or remain symbolic.

The implication is a two-stage process. In the first stage, federal political dependence increases Sarawak's bargaining opportunity. In the second, legislation, formal agreements, fiscal arrangements and implementation capacity determine whether that opportunity becomes an enduring redistribution of authority. This distinction explains why apparently similar announcements have produced different substantive outcomes and why the assessment of autonomy must focus on implementation rather than political declarations alone.

4.4.3. Constitutional Recognition, Substantive Authority and Durability

A central finding is the gap between constitutional recognition and substantive governing authority. The Constitution (Amendment) Act 2022 strengthened acknowledgement of Malaysia's formation and the distinctive position of Sabah and Sarawak, but it did not itself reallocate major legislative responsibilities. This supports Harding's (2018) distinction between the formal safeguards associated with asymmetrical federalism and the effective autonomy experienced by Indigenous territories. Recognition matters because it strengthens the constitutional and political legitimacy of Sarawak's claims, but its practical effect depends on the legislation, fiscal settlements and administrative arrangements that follow.

The cases examined demonstrate that autonomy must be assessed along at least three dimensions: the scope of the authority obtained, the legal security of the arrangement and the resources available for implementation. The Bintulu Port transfer involved statutory and institutional change and is therefore more durable than an informal administrative accommodation. Expanded state participation in education remains bounded by federal legislative competence. The RM600 million Article 112D payment produces an immediate fiscal benefit, but the absence of an agreed permanent formula preserves uncertainty. Classifying all three developments simply as devolution would conceal meaningful differences in depth and reversibility.

Recent sectoral research reinforces this distinction. Mozihim and Anwar (2025) describe Sarawak's education governance as conditional autonomy: the state has obtained meaningful discretion in areas such as state-funded school projects and the Dual Language Programme, while curriculum authority and teacher recruitment remain substantially centralised. This closely supports the present finding that administrative participation can improve local responsiveness without constituting full policy-making authority. Education thus illustrates how negotiated centralism may widen implementation discretion while leaving the underlying legislative hierarchy intact.

Fiscal relations reveal a parallel tension between constitutional entitlement and negotiated settlement. Faruqi (2026) argues that the special fiscal position of Sabah and Sarawak must be understood within the wider problem of balancing intergovernmental equity and efficiency. The unresolved Article 112D formula shows why an increased payment should not be equated with institutional certainty. An interim amount can meet immediate political and developmental needs, but a transparent and regularly reviewed formula would reduce dependence on recurring bargaining and clarify the basis of federal and state obligations.

Constitutional entrenchment is not the only means of making autonomy durable. Depending on the sector, federal or state legislation, binding intergovernmental agreements, transparent fiscal formulas, permanent joint institutions and enforceable

dispute-resolution procedures may provide more practical protection. What matters is that each arrangement identifies the responsible authority, financing source, accountability mechanism, implementation schedule and review process. Without such clarity, administrative decentralisation may transfer public expectations to Sarawak without transferring sufficient authority or resources to fulfil them.

4.4.4. MA63 and the Transition towards Developmental Regionalism

The findings indicate that MA63 functions as more than a historical agreement. It provides the constitutional and political basis through which Sarawak justifies differentiated treatment and evaluates federal–state relations. This interpretation is consistent with Puyok (2024), who emphasizes the distinctive historical foundations of autonomy in Sarawak and Sabah. However, contemporary issues involving education, infrastructure, fiscal transfers, digital administration and energy regulation cannot be addressed through historical restoration alone. They require new legal, fiscal and administrative arrangements that translate MA63 principles into contemporary governance.

Describing MA63 as a constitutional covenant captures this continuing political and normative role. Sarawak's claims are therefore often presented as the fulfilment of foundational commitments rather than ordinary demands for decentralization. Nevertheless, this interpretation should not be treated as an independent legal doctrine. MA63 does not replace the Federal Constitution or automatically determine jurisdictional outcomes. Its role in devolution is therefore mediated: MA63 legitimizes the direction of reform, while legislation, intergovernmental agreement, fiscal provision and administrative capacity determine how additional authority is implemented.

Recent research also highlights the importance of public understanding. Suznan et al. (2026) show that perceptions of MA63 are shaped by historical memory, institutional trust, access to information and visible policy implementation. This suggests that the legitimacy of negotiated autonomy depends not only on elite bargaining but also on whether citizens can distinguish political commitments from implemented outcomes. Transparent reporting is therefore important, particularly through mechanisms such as the MA63 Dashboard. Categories such as resolved, under discussion and implemented should clearly distinguish agreement in principle from legal and operational completion. The findings further suggest that Sarawak's regionalism is gradually acquiring a stronger developmental orientation. Historical grievances and MA63-based claims remain important, but growing fiscal resources, specialized institutions and state-led economic planning increasingly connect autonomy with governing capacity. Keating's (2013) concept of new regionalism helps explain this transition, in which territorial identity supports institution-building and development rather than functioning solely as resistance to central authority. This does not mean that grievance has disappeared. Instead, rights-based mobilization increasingly provides political support for building institutions and expanding policy capacity. Puyok (2024) similarly links Sarawak's autonomy trajectory to strong regional identity, cohesive political leadership and sustained state-level mobilization.

Education illustrates both the potential and limits of this transition. Mozihim and Anwar (2025) describe Sarawak's educational governance as a form of conditional autonomy, whereby the state exercises greater discretion over selected programmes while major functions such as curriculum and teacher recruitment remain largely federal. This

demonstrates that greater administrative participation can expand policy space without amounting to full legislative devolution. Its significance should therefore be assessed through tangible outcomes such as school infrastructure, teacher availability and educational performance.

The same principle applies to fiscal and resource autonomy. Greater revenue and institutional control expand Sarawak's capacity to pursue regional priorities, but they also increase responsibility for policy outcomes. Hutchinson and Lee (2025) highlight Sarawak's growing economic position and use of favorable federal political conditions to consolidate autonomy. Yet greater revenue and institutional expansion do not themselves demonstrate developmental success. Their legitimacy depends on whether additional authority produces improvements in public services, rural connectivity, employment and territorial equality. The World Bank's (2025) partnership with the Sarawak and Federal Governments on state-owned-enterprise governance, public financial management and results-based budgeting further illustrates the importance of linking expanded authority with institutional accountability and measurable outcomes.

This transition also changes the direction of accountability. As Sarawak acquires greater responsibility, policy shortcomings cannot be attributed solely to federal centralization. Citizens may increasingly assess the state government according to how effectively and equitably it uses its expanded authority, while federal responsibility remains relevant in areas where legislation, funding or personnel remain centrally controlled. Suznan et al. (2026) further show that visible implementation affects institutional trust and public understanding of MA63. Development performance therefore becomes not only an outcome of autonomy but also a condition of its political legitimacy and sustainability.

Taken together, MA63 and developmental regionalism are closely connected. MA63 provides historical and constitutional legitimacy for differentiated authorities, regional identity sustains political mobilization, institutional capacity converts negotiated authority into policy, and development performance determines its practical credibility. Sarawak's transition remains incomplete because rights-based claims, administrative constraints and developmental ambitions continue to coexist. Its long-term sustainability will depend on whether negotiated autonomy is translated into durable institutions and broadly experienced public benefits.

4.4.5. Democratic, Federal and Practical Limits of Negotiated Centralism

Negotiated centralism also carries democratic risks. Executive-led bargaining can produce timely agreements, particularly when technical matters require close intergovernmental coordination. However, negotiations dominated by political leaders and officials may limit legislative scrutiny, public participation and access to the terms of agreements concerning petroleum, fiscal entitlements or major administrative responsibilities. Yeoh (2024) argues that increasing state demands require more effective federal-state negotiation platforms. The findings support this conclusion and suggest that regularised forums, published implementation criteria and transparent progress reporting would reduce dependence on personalised or coalition-based bargaining.

A second limitation is political reversibility. The model partly depends on federal coalition fragmentation and the importance of GPS support. A future federal government with a secure majority may face fewer incentives to concede new responsibilities or

accelerate unresolved matters. Institutionalisation is therefore not an optional final stage but the mechanism that protects negotiated outcomes from electoral change. Agreements that remain informal, interim or administratively ambiguous are most exposed to shifts in leadership and coalition arithmetic.

A third concern involves horizontal equity across the federation. Differentiated arrangements may be justified by Sarawak's constitutional history, territorial characteristics and developmental needs, yet other states may perceive selective concessions as partisan rewards or seek equivalent treatment without comparable foundations. Puyok's (2024) comparison demonstrates that autonomy outcomes already differ even between Sarawak and Sabah. Faruqi (2026) similarly stresses the need to balance equity and efficiency in intergovernmental fiscal relations. Sustainable asymmetry therefore requires publicly intelligible principles explaining when differentiated treatment is constitutionally justified and how it remains compatible with national solidarity.

A fourth limitation concerns administrative coordination. Shared or overlapping responsibilities can generate uncertainty over standards, financing, personnel and accountability. The petroleum dispute illustrates how federal and state laws may produce competing claims rather than a clean transfer of jurisdiction. Education demonstrates a different form of overlap in which Sarawak exercises implementation discretion within a federally controlled policy field. Such arrangements require permanent coordinating bodies and credible dispute-resolution mechanisms; otherwise, increased participation may create duplication or allow each level of government to attribute failures to the other.

Finally, the evidence does not establish that negotiated centralism will necessarily lead to deeper autonomy. Incremental gains may accumulate and gradually reshape federal practice, but they may also stabilise centralisation by satisfying selected demands without altering the underlying distribution of power. This ambiguity is central to the concept. Negotiated centralism can function as a pathway to reform, an instrument of accommodation or a mechanism through which the centre contains regional pressure.

Overall, Sarawak's regionalism has made Malaysian federalism more responsive and asymmetrical, but not less centralised in its basic constitutional design. Its principal impact is the creation of negotiated spaces in which selected powers, resources and implementation roles can be recalibrated. The consequences remain conditional. These spaces may accommodate territorial diversity and reduce centre-regional conflict, but their durability and legitimacy depend on legal protection, institutional capacity, democratic oversight, public understanding and demonstrable development outcomes. Negotiated centralism therefore explains both how incremental reform has become possible and why that reform remains uneven, contested and potentially reversible.

5. Conclusion

Sarawak's post-2018 regionalism has contributed to a more differentiated operation of Malaysian federalism without displacing its centralised foundations. The state secured selective gains in constitutional recognition, fiscal arrangements, administrative participation and resource governance. These outcomes were neither comprehensive decentralisation nor steps towards separation. They constituted incremental

asymmetrical adjustments whose scope and durability varied according to their legal and institutional form.

The concept of negotiated centralism explains this coexistence of regional empowerment and systemic continuity. Federal coalition fragmentation increased GPS's bargaining leverage, but leverage produced results only when supported by legal expertise, technical negotiation and state institutional capacity. MA63 operated as an evolving normative framework for these negotiations, while legal proceedings provided a supplementary means of clarifying contested authority. The concept therefore complements theories of asymmetrical, executive and dynamic federalism by explaining how differentiated gains may accumulate within a federation that remains predominantly centralised.

The findings carry three policy implications. First, important administrative gains should be supported by legislation, formal intergovernmental agreements or transparent implementation rules appropriate to the responsibility concerned. Second, the federal and Sarawak governments should establish a permanent, transparent Article 112D calculation formula to reduce dependence on recurring political negotiation. Third, expanded state authority should be accompanied by clear performance measures, legislative scrutiny and public accountability so that autonomy produces demonstrable improvements in services and territorial development. These measures would strengthen the durability and legitimacy of negotiated asymmetry without requiring uniform decentralisation across the Federation.

The conclusions remain limited by the study's small elite sample and its focus on Sarawak. Future research should examine public and civil-society perspectives and compare Sarawak with Sabah to assess how constitutional position, political cohesion and governing capacity influence different autonomy outcomes. Sarawak's experience ultimately shows that negotiated territorial differentiation can accommodate regional claims, but its long-term value depends on whether politically contingent gains become stable, accountable and publicly beneficial institutions.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak research ethics committee before data collection. All participants received information about the study and provided informed consent before participating in the interviews.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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