Classical Malay Populism: The Case of Muhammad Sanusi

Shah Mohd Akmal Abdul Halim[1]* and Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail[2]

[1]*Institute of Ethnic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*
[2]*Research Centre for History, Politics and International Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the populism of Muhammad Sanusi Md. Nor and its implications for Malaysia's political dynamics during the 2023 state elections. It pursues three objectives: first, to situate populism as a political strategy in Southeast Asian and Malaysian contexts; second, to conceptualise the Malay populist, or what may be described as a "classical Malay populist," through an analysis of Sanusi's political behaviour; and third, to evaluate the impact of his strategies on electoral outcomes in Kedah and Penang. The study adopts a qualitative case study design, combining field observations during the 2023 campaign period in Sik, Gurun, and Seberang Perai with one in-depth interview and supplementary informal conversations with voters and party members across multiple parties. These primary data were triangulated with secondary materials and analysed through discourse analysis, focussing on rhetorical, symbolic, and performative elements. The findings indicate that Sanusi's populism, expressed through his *anak kampung* (rural son) persona, anti-elitist rhetoric, and symbolic gestures amplified by digital platforms such as TikTok, reshaped political narratives and alliances, enabling PN to achieve a historic victory in Kedah while strengthening its presence in Penang's Malay-majority districts.

Keywords: 2023 states election, Malaysian politics, Muhammad Sanusi, Perikatan Nasional, populism

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, Southeast Asia has experienced a notable resurgence of populist politics, mirroring broader global patterns of political realignment. This development is exemplified in the region by leaders such as Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand (Hewison, 2017), Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines (Thompson, 2021), Joko

Widodo in Indonesia (Mietzner, 2015), and his successor, Prabowo Subianto (Yilmaz et al., 2024). These leaders have distinguished themselves through their ability to resonate with the masses, often employing rhetoric that frames political discourse as a dichotomy between the "common people" and the "elite." The term "populism" itself has become a focal point of scholarly debate, often employed to describe the political strategies and narratives these leaders adopt to consolidate support. Populist leaders typically portray themselves as outsiders to traditional power structures, advocating for the marginalised majority while vilifying entrenched elites as obstacles to justice and equity. In the Southeast Asian context, this approach has proven particularly potent, as deep-seated inequalities, economic disenfranchisement, and historical grievances create fertile ground for such narratives.

Within Malaysia, populism is a relatively understudied phenomenon, often overshadowed by analyses of ethnic politics and systemic power dynamics. However, the 2023 state elections have thrust populism into the spotlight, particularly through the rise of Muhammad Sanusi Md. Nor, the Menteri Besar of Kedah. The 2023 Malaysia State Election stands as a pivotal event in the nation's political history, marked by the ascendancy of Perikatan Nasional (PN) and the notable influence of Muhammad Sanusi's populist appeal. This election not only reflected the electorate's sentiments but also underscored the complex interplay between leadership personas and political

success. The victory of PN, particularly in the states of Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu, and its significant inroads into traditionally opposition-held territories such as Selangor and Penang, signal a shift in the political landscape, with implications for the balance of power and the future of governance in Malaysia. The phenomenon of Sanusi's populism, characterised by his direct and confrontational style, has been a defining factor in the election. His ability to resonate with the Malay-Muslim majority, coupled with his image as an anti-establishment figure, has contributed to the consolidation of PN's support base.

This research explores the "Sanusi factor" and its influence on electoral outcomes by examining how his populist rhetoric and the strategic juxtaposition of his persona against the political establishment contributed significantly to PN's electoral gains. Specifically, the article pursues three objectives: first, to provide an overview of populism as a political strategy within the Southeast Asian and Malaysian contexts; second, to conceptualise the Malay populist, or what may be described as a "classical Malay populist," through an analysis of Muhammad Sanusi's political behaviour; and third, to evaluate the impact of Sanusi's populist strategies on the 2023 state elections, particularly in shaping PN's electoral gains in Kedah and Penang.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Populism, frequently invoked in political discourse, has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. Webber (2023) highlights

populism's contrast between rule by the people and rule by corrupt elites, emphasising its multifaceted nature. This view is echoed in critiques that see populism as a strategy where a personalistic leader gains power through direct, unmediated support from large segments of the population. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) describe populism as a thin-cantered ideology, dividing society into 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite,' highlighting the populist claim that politics should reflect the general will of the people. Laclau (2005) suggests that populism functions as a political logic, aggregating diverse social demands that institutional politics fails to address, thus constructing a collective identity. Arditi (2007) presents populism as the 'shadow of democracy,' suggesting that it thrives in the gaps of democratic systems by catalysing engagement but also challenges democratic norms by undermining institutional mediations. Müller (2016) views populism as exclusionary, with populists asserting themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of the people, undermining democratic pluralism. Plagemann and Ufen (2017) highlight that populism often claims to speak on behalf of a morally pure people against a corrupt elite, with populists despising intermediary institutions such as courts, parliaments, and mainstream media.

Populism manifests on both the right and left of the political spectrum, though its expressions differ. Right-wing populists, seen in figures like Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, focus on nativism and authoritarianism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Left-wing populists, such as Bernie Sanders and Syriza in Greece, emphasize social justice and anti-capitalism (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). However, this left-right framework often fails to capture the nuanced forms of populism that emerge globally. For instance, Joko Widodo's "polite populism" and Prabowo Subianto's "fluctuating populism" in Indonesia (Mietzner, 2014; Yilmaz et al., 2024) reflect distinct styles of populism tailored to their political environments. Similarly, Volodymyr Zelenskyy's "technocratic populism" in Ukraine (Viedrov, 2023) combines populism with a focus on technical expertise and pragmatic governance. In the Philippines, Duterte's presidency has been described as "violent populism," marked by strongman tactics and authoritarian discourse (Thompson, 2021). Demuru (2021) introduces "gastropopulism," describing populist strategies employed by Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro, who use social media to share images of food to connect with voters on a personal and cultural level.

Globally, populism varies across cultural and institutional contexts. In Malaysia, populism interacts with structural, ideological, and ethno-religious factors unique to the country's sociopolitical environment. Weiss (2020) critiques Malaysia's political landscape, noting its ethnic exclusivity, economic disparity, and hybrid regime features, which share traits with populist systems. However, she argues that Malaysia lacks the ideological coherence

and mobilisation typical of populism. Weiss suggests that personalisation of politics and illiberal tendencies are more prominent than populism in Malaysia's politics.

Shah (2019) analyses the 2018 general election, viewing it as a pivotal moment where populist rhetoric intersected with moral and inclusive claims to counter ethno-nationalist narratives. Economic justice emerged as a counter-narrative in a polarised political environment. Halim and Azhari (2020) examine ethno-religious identity in Malaysian populism, particularly how opposition parties like UMNO and PAS leveraged Malay-Muslim identity politics to address concerns about economic instability and cultural threats during the 2018 political realignments. Their study demonstrates how identity politics, in combination with populist strategies, fractured Malaysia's diverse society for political gain. Gonzales (2023) situates Malaysian populism within regional trends in Southeast Asia, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. He argues that Malaysian leaders used Islamist populism and ethnonationalist rhetoric to consolidate power, showing how populist movements adapt during crises. This analysis emphasises how structural and societal instability can facilitate populist narratives in Malaysia.

Shukri (2024) provides one of the most detailed comparative accounts of Malaysian populism, tracing its varied expressions across leaders. Mahathir Mohamad is framed through authoritarian and exclusionary populism; Hadi Awang through Islamist and anti-elite appeals; Muhyiddin Yassin through an intensified ethnonationalism after his loss of federal power; Najib Razak through soft economic populism undermined by corruption; and Anwar Ibrahim through inclusionary populism that later gave way to pragmatism in office. More recently, she identifies Sanusi Md Nor and Akmal Saleh as part of a new generation of Malay populists, with Sanusi standing out for PAS's ability to integrate ethnonationalist and Islamist strands more effectively than UMNO.

While these insights underscore the diversity of Malaysian populism, the emphasis remains on ethnocultural and identity-based appeals. Less attention has been given to how populism may also be examined through classical strategies adapted into new forms, such as symbolic gestures, rural authenticity, and anti-elitist narratives, and how these elements shaped electoral outcomes. This study addresses that gap by analysing the 2023 state elections in Kedah and Penang, thereby contributing to the broader scope of populism research in Malaysia.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study design, using both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through field observation and in-depth interviews. Fieldwork was conducted during the 2023 state election campaign, from 9 to 11 August, in selected constituencies across Kedah and Penang, including Sik, Gurun, and Seberang Perai. During this period, campaign rallies, candidate walkabouts, and political rallies

(*ceramah*) were observed. The purpose was to examine whether Sanusi's influence was applied in campaign practices and voter engagement. Sik was chosen as the focal point because it is Sanusi's political base and provides a lens to understand local perceptions of his leadership and rhetoric.

In-depth interviews supported the observations. The main interview was with Muhammad Fahmi Mohd Raffi, a political science graduate and *anak jati* (native) of Sik. He has closely followed Sanusi's career and observed local political developments, providing contextually informed insights. Supplementary informal conversational interviews were conducted with local voters in Sik, Gurun, and Seberang Perai, as well as with political party members from UMNO, PAS, BERSATU, PKR, and DAP. This approach broadened the scope of perspectives by incorporating both grassroots voices and partisan viewpoints.

Secondary data were gathered from scholarly literature, dissertations, reports, and media sources such as online news outlets, social media, webinars, and political videos. These materials provided theoretical context and placed the field evidence within broader debates on populism and electoral politics. Data were analysed through discourse analysis. The analysis focussed on rhetorical, symbolic, and performative elements in campaign practices and interview accounts. Attention was given to recurring motifs such as the *anak kampung* (a rural son) identity, anti-elitist rhetoric, and symbolic gestures of accessibility. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents enhanced credibility. The inclusion of multiple perspectives reduced bias and strengthened validity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Muhammad Sanusi and the 'Anak Kampung' Character

"[To understand the poor, you have to experience poverty. Like me, I understand (the struggles of the poor). My father had 13 children and did all kinds of work, including climbing petai trees, tapping rubber, building houses, doing clearing work for wages, fishing—my father did everything. So I know what poverty is]" (Muhammad Sanusi, 2023).

In examining how Sanusi's contemporary political behaviour has been shaped, it is necessary to situate his background within broader structural conditions. Born in Sik, Kedah, he grew up in a state defined by a predominantly agricultural economy and slow industrialisation. His early life illustrates the structural inequalities and economic vulnerabilities faced by Malaysia's rural precariat. Raised in a large working-class household, he experienced financial hardship from an early age. His father's irregular employment provided little stability, while economic pressures required early entry into the informal labor market. School holidays were spent as a deckhand on an anchovy boat in Taman Intan, Sungai Petani, earning RM7 per day. Later, he worked in the construction

sector in Tanah Liat, where income security depended on project availability. His commute on foot along railway tracks and daily responsibilities—mixing cement, carrying bricks, and transporting materials—highlight the precarious nature of such work. On Sundays, he assisted his employer in procuring and packaging sportswear for multinational brands such as Reebok. Financial hardship disrupted his education, at one point delaying his return to school to support his family. Financial challenges compelled him to temporarily halt schooling; nevertheless, Sanusi returned, managing simultaneously to complete secondary education and earn income from selling fried chicken at night markets well into early morning hours (Muhammad Sanusi Official Facebook, 2021).

These experiences of precarious labour shaped his worldview and embedded an acute awareness of economic vulnerability and structural inequality. Years spent in fishing, construction, and small-scale entrepreneurship generated resilience but also revealed the limitations of social mobility for Malaysia's rural working class. Economic hardship was not abstract but experienced directly, and this informed his perspectives on governance, justice, and development. His political engagement therefore developed within the lived struggles of the working-class precariat.

Sanusi's later political persona has drawn extensively from this background. His identification as an *anak kampung* (rural son) operates as a populist resource, functioning less as a constructed image

than as an articulation of lived experience. Sanusi's populist appeal stemmed from his ability to embody the values and experiences of the rural *marhaen* (ordinary working-class people). In contrast to political figures who emphasize technocratic expertise or *agamawan* (religious figure), he relied on accessibility and cultural familiarity as key elements of his public image. Symbolic practices—such as sitting cross-legged on the floor, driving lorries, or operating backhoes—communicated proximity to everyday life. The use of northern Malay dialect (*loghat Utara*) reinforced this rural identification (Muhammad Fahmi, 2023). These gestures highlighted his image as closely connected to ordinary Malays and, at the same time, functioned as populist devices that framed his alignment with grassroots identities.

The political utility of this approach was evident in its capacity to embed populist narratives within cultural symbols. Actions such as playing football with youths or visiting households after Tarawih prayers (night prayers performed during Ramadan), were interpreted as markers of solidarity and familiarity rather than as elitist performance. The *anak kampung* persona thus became central to a discourse of shared experience and collective struggle. Such practices exemplify how populist leaders mobilise cultural identity and local values to construct proximity to "the people."

Sanusi's engagement with the everyday practices of rural communities reflects a recognisable populist strategy that positions leaders as aligned with the people, particularly the marginalised majority. His

association with the values and cultural identity of rural Malaysians contributed to the construction of an image rooted in local authenticity. Symbolic gestures extended beyond staged appearances and were perceived as part of a consistent public demeanour. This approach resonated with grassroots audiences. His communication style, marked by the northern Malay *cakap lepas* manner (blunt speech), further reinforced perceptions of authenticity. While critics regarded it as unrefined or unprofessional, supporters interpreted it as a defining element of relatability. Even casual actions, such as playfully tapping a woman's head during a public event (Ezreen, 2023), were framed as expressions of his kampung identity.

Sanusi's willingness to engage in the everyday practices of rural communities reflects a classic populist strategy, presenting leaders as aligned with the people, particularly the marginalised majority. By aligning himself with the values and cultural identity of rural Malaysians, he constructed an image rooted in local authenticity. This positioned him as the antithesis of urban-centric elites and federal authorities, often portrayed as detached and neglectful of rural needs. This alignment resonates with the populist narrative of "the people" versus "the elite," a hallmark of populism as described by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017). Such actions fit the populist strategy of employing symbolic, culturally resonant gestures to emphasise shared identity and solidarity with the grassroots (Laclau, 2005). Sanusi's populist approach allowed

him to forge deep connections with rural communities, presenting himself as a true representative of their struggles and aspirations. Positioning himself as one of "the people," he successfully built a robust support base. His relatable lived experiences and unassuming demeanour stood in stark contrast to the perceived elitism of his political opponents, amplifying his appeal among grassroots voters.

Beyond rural communities, digital platforms extended the reach of Sanusi's populist strategies. Facebook and TikTok operated as central arenas for disseminating and reinterpreting his symbols beyond Kedah's kampung context. By January 2025, his TikTok account recorded more than 1.1 million followers, surpassing Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's 964,300. His Facebook page also served as a site for autobiographical storytelling. It featured accounts of economic hardship and precarious labour during his youth, reinforcing his identification with ordinary Malays. This pattern recalls Demuru's (2021) notion of "gastropopulism." Leaders such as Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro used culturally resonant social media content to construct proximity with voters. In a parallel way, Sanusi employed digital platforms through narratives of past struggles on Facebook and portrayals of rural practices on TikTok. According to a police officer familiar with the Kedah state election campaign, much of this content circulated through the voluntary actions of supporters rather than direct coordination. These practices illustrate how online engagement

operated as symbolic resources, translating cultural familiarity into a digitally mediated form of populist proximity.

The Rise of Sanusi's Populism

Muhammad Sanusi's populism began to solidify when he assumed the role of Menteri Besar Kedah in May 2020. This position enabled him to strengthen his connection with the grass root while shaping a persona that deeply resonated with ordinary Malays. Sanusi's engagement with football offered a compelling narrative that intertwined his persona with the broader cultural fabric of Kedah. Football, often regarded as a unifying force in Malaysia, provided Sanusi with an avenue to project himself as a relatable and multi-dimensional leader. By participating in matches and engaging with the sport publicly, Sanusi effectively utilised football to break down traditional barriers between political elites and the public, reinforcing his image as "one of us". His skills on the pitch, showcased in a widely circulated video of him performing a bicycle kick during a friendly match, became a talking point that transcended politics. During the 2023 state election, Sanusi strategically incorporated football into his campaign activities, participating in a match at Felda Teloi Timur to merge political messaging with community engagement (Zakaraya, 2023). He also extended this approach to candidate selection by fielding former football players Muhammad Radhi Mat Din and Baddrol Bakhtiar as candidates for Alor Mengkudu and Gurun, respectively.

Studies have shown that sports often function as a form of soft power, enabling leaders to connect with their constituents on a personal and emotional level (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). In Sanusi's case, his involvement in football elevated him beyond the realm of politics, establishing him as a cultural icon within Kedah. Football holds a deeply ingrained significance in the sociocultural identity of modern Malay society, celebrated as the sukan rakyat (sport of the people) and one of the most influential forms of recreation in Malaysia. Its importance extends beyond entertainment, symbolising community pride and unity. The cultural potency of football is epitomised by the dramatic transformation of Johor's football landscape initiated in 2013 under the stewardship of Tunku Mahkota Johor (TMJ), with his leadership giving rise to the influential Johor Darul Ta'zim (JDT) phenomenon. TMJ's leadership revitalised Johorean football and at the same time elevated the monarchy's sociocultural profile, effectively positioning it as an active catalyst behind this cultural reawakening (Shah Mohd Akmal, 2020). Within the framework of populism, football functions as a symbolic resource that enables leaders to embody proximity to "the people," transforming sporting spaces into arenas that integrate political legitimacy, cultural identity, and mass mobilisation (Sandu & Di Ruzza, 2025).

Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor's appointment as President of the Kedah Football Association (KFA) in 2020, consistent with the tradition of state Chief Ministers assuming leadership of state

football associations, signalled the onset of his public conflict with TMJ. The rivalry drew national attention after TMJ sent Sanusi a bouquet of flowers and a McDonald's meal, a gesture that exemplified the use of symbolic performance in framing political and cultural contestation in Malaysia's public sphere (Fong, 2021). Although framed in a light-hearted manner, the exchange functioned as a public marker of the rivalry between the two figures.

Sanusi's critiques transcended personal disputes, focussing on broader governance challenges within Malaysian football. He criticized what he described as "the excessive centralisation of power" in the sport's administration. In one notable instance, he remarked:

> *"[Football is not meant for individuals, and there should be no 'deity' in this sport to the extent that everyone has to seek his approval first. There should be no 'deity' in football because it is a sport for everyone....Before the match, they bring out a big banner that says 'fair play,' but there's a 'deity' Everyone has to ask him first—'it's doomed' if that's the way it is, how can we even play like that?]* (Tan, 2022)."

Despite appearing superficially trivial, this public declaration became symbolic, amplifying Sanusi's populist image. Among his supporters, Sanusi's willingness to openly confront a powerful establishment figure like TMJ was perceived as courageous, relatable, and profoundly authentic. Further enhancing his populist appeal was the strong anti-JDT sentiment pervasive among segments of Malaysian football fans, particularly within Kedah. This sentiment, coupled with criticisms of JDT's prolonged dominance in Malaysian football—exemplified by twelve consecutive league titles from 2014 to 2025—was frequently interpreted by non-JDT supporters as a concentration of sporting power 'detrimental' to the game, thereby amplifying Sanusi's popularity. This dichotomy consolidated his base while reinforcing his populist appeal within the broader football community. Indeed, Sanusi's rhetorical confrontations with TMJ, articulated in a cynical and blunt register, resonated among segments of his support base. Whether construed as a calculated populist strategy or as an authentic expression of grievance, these interventions were nonetheless articulated by the mass public as a symbolic "voice of the people." Within this discursive process, Sanusi operated as a nodal point in Laclau's (2005) sense, binding together fragmented grievances into collective demands that contested established hierarchies.

Building on his political persona, Sanusi consolidated his populist appeal by intertwining contemporary issues with selective historical narratives, a strategy that positioned him simultaneously as relatable to his audience and assertive in projecting authority. In May 2023, Sanusi remarked:

> *"[I am waiting for confirmation from the Department of Survey and Mapping Malaysia (JUPEM) if there is any basis to verify the boundaries of Kedah with other neighboring states. What I know*

is that Penang belongs to Kedah...Not saying we want to take (Penang) back, not something we lost, it's already our right"] (Noorazura, 2023)."

This statement received widespread attention, including a strong response from Penang DAP leaders such as Lim Guan Eng and RSN Rayer, who lodged police reports claiming that Sanusi's comments caused unease among Penang residents about losing their state (Dermawan, 2023). While the claim sparked outrage among opposition leaders and federal authorities, it resonated among his supporters, many of them interpreting it as an assertion of Kedah's pride and sovereignty. The political mileage Sanusi derived from this statement can be understood in the context of Penang's demographic and political realities. As a state dominated by the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Penang is often perceived by segments of the Malay electorate as a symbol of diminished Malay political influence. By invoking a narrative of reclaiming Kedah's historical right over Penang, Sanusi effectively positioned himself as a defender of Malay-Muslim heritage and sovereignty. This rhetoric not only played to his existing voter base but also appealed to broader sentiments of cultural and political disenfranchisement among Malay voters. This narrative further amplified his populist appeal, presenting him as a leader committed to restoring Malay dominance in a state widely perceived to be under DAP control. For some Malays, this behaviour symbolized resistance against what was perceived as a threat to the Malay status quo.

A pivotal moment in Sanusi's rise came in July 2023, when he was arrested under sedition charges for alleged remarks about the Selangor Sultan. The arrest of Muhammad Sanusi in July 2023 under sedition charges marked a defining moment in his political trajectory. The charges were linked to his alleged remarks concerning the Sultan of Selangor during a campaign event in Gombak. Sanusi reportedly stated that "a great Sultan like that (referring to Kedah) would not choose a 'cokia' (substandard) Chief Minister like Amir (Amirudin)" (Malaysia Gazette, 2023). This remark, made in the context of PAS's broader efforts to consolidate the Malay vote, triggered significant controversy. The Sultan of Selangor viewed the statement as a direct affront to the monarchy, escalating tensions and leading to the filing of 57 police reports against Sanusi (Qistina, 2023). This incident, occurring just weeks before the state elections, became a rallying point for his supporters and a turning point in his political career. The arrest was widely perceived as a politically motivated act aimed at weakening PN's momentum, but it had the opposite effect.

Instead of diminishing his stature, the arrest of Muhammad Sanusi unexpectedly elevated his political stature, transforming him into a symbol of defiance and resistance. A single image of Sanusi raising his hand as he was escorted by police during his court appearance became iconic, resonating deeply with his supporters and sparking widespread comparisons to Anwar Ibrahim's raised fist during his 1998 arrest amid the Reformasi movement. The photograph of

Sanusi, simple yet potent, transcended its immediate context to become a rallying symbol of opposition to perceived federal oppression. Shared widely across platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and TikTok, the image of Sanusi's raised-hand gesture quickly transformed into a potent symbol of resistance and populist identity. Reminiscent of the iconic style associated with Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim during the Reformasi era, the gesture became the centrepiece of a phenomenon dubbed *Fenomena Angkat Tangan Sanusi*. It dominated social media, emerging as a meme and viral trend that significantly amplified Sanusi's populist appeal.

Beyond its visual impact, the raised-hand gesture also carried auditory resonance. A voice clip of Sanusi proclaiming, *"Saya angkat tangan lawan Anwar Ibrahim,"* (I raise my hand against Anwar Ibrahim) became a widely shared soundtrack, featured in over 8,300 TikTok videos. Users across the platform replicated the gesture, many lauding Sanusi, the candidate for DUN Jeneri, as a "hero" and branding the trend as *"Refornusi."* The movement extended to various sectors, with construction workers uploading videos of themselves raising excavator arms in solidarity, often accompanied by PAS flags and the soundtrack, turning their tools into symbols of political allegiance. Sanusi himself embraced the trend by using the raised-hand gesture during his campaign events. The gesture was met with enthusiastic cheers and applause. At gatherings, supporters mirrored the gesture, further solidifying its status as a unifying act of resistance and an emblem of populist identity (Malaysiakini, 2023). The integration of visual and auditory elements into Sanusi's campaign created a multifaceted narrative that became deeply embedded in the election discourse. Memes, hashtags, and viral slogans elevated him into a larger-than-life figure, galvanising his voter base and drawing attention from undecided voters. Sanusi's adept use of the trend demonstrates a strategic integration of traditional political campaigning with the viral dynamics of social media. This approach enhanced his visibility and reinforced his image as a populist leader who embodies the spirit of resistance and unity.

Sanusi's Populism and Its Impact on the 2023 State Elections

The 2023 state elections, held on August 12, 2023, were pivotal in reshaping the political dynamics of northern Malaysia, particularly in Kedah and parts of Penang. Conducted separately from the 15th General Election (GE15), these elections underscored the growing salience of populist narratives in shaping voter alignments. As PN's election director and public face of the coalition's campaign, Sanusi played a central role in consolidating PAS's position in Kedah and extending its reach into Malay-majority areas of Penang.

Kedah: The Transformation into a PAS Stronghold

The 2023 Kedah state elections marked a watershed moment, solidifying PN's

status as the preeminent political force in the state. With a resounding victory, securing 33 out of 36 state assembly seats, PN achieved an unprecedented electoral outcome that fundamentally transformed Kedah's political landscape. This landslide result was emblematic not only of the coalition's effective electoral strategy but also of the central role played by Muhammad Sanusi. His leadership and populist rhetoric were instrumental in galvanizing support for PAS and its coalition partners. Within PN, PAS won 21 seats, Bersatu secured 11, and Gerakan contributed one seat. Collectively, these results reflected the coalition's broad-based appeal across Kedah. In stark contrast to previous elections, the 2023 results demonstrated a clear and unequivocal shift toward PN dominance. For instance, in 2013, PAS had secured only nine seats, while Barisan Nasional (BN) held a commanding 21-seat majority. By 2018, PAS had expanded its presence to 15 seats, but Pakatan Harapan (PH) capitalized on growing dissatisfaction with BN to secure a majority of 18 seats (Table 1). These earlier elections, marked by competitive and fragmented distributions of political power, reflected a political environment in which no single party or coalition exercised overwhelming sway. The 2023 state elections, however, represented a decisive turning point. Under Sanusi's role as PN's election director, PAS and its allies consolidated their voter base while simultaneously eroding the long-established strongholds of both PH and BN.

Table 1
Kedah State Assembly Results (2013–2023)

Election	PAS/PN Seats	PR/PH Seats*	BN Seats
GE13 (2013)	9	6	21
GE14 (2018)	15	18	3
State Election 2023	33	3	0

Source: Election Commission of Malaysia (2013, 2018, 2023)
Note. *Without PAS

A key element of this strategy was PN's ability to connect with voters through relatable and strategically chosen candidates. One notable example of Sanusi's strategic populism was the decision to field former football star Baddrol Bakhtiar as a candidate in Gurun. Historically a BN/MCA stronghold since 1986, Gurun was considered a challenging constituency for PAS to win. However, Sanusi's decision to select Baddrol, a widely admired and relatable figure, proved to be a strategic masterstroke. For the first time in history, PAS captured Gurun, a seat that PH had previously secured in the 2018 general election. Rather than signaling a decisive transformation, this outcome symbolised the capacity of populist strategies to disrupt entrenched voting patterns and underscored the role of candidate profiling in shaping electoral behaviour. Similarly, Sanusi's decision to field another former footballer, Radzi Mat Din, in Alor Mengkudu yielded significant results. Radzi's victory over PH Kedah Chairman Mahfuz Omar, with a commanding majority of 10,104 votes, underscored PN's ability to outmaneuver established political figures.

The defeat of Mahfuz, a prominent and seasoned politician, underscored the salience of Sanusi's populist discourse in mobilizing voter support and reshaping electoral preferences. It also reflected a broader rejection of PH's leadership in Kedah, with voters gravitating toward PN's promises of change and its narrative of reclaiming local pride and sovereignty. The strategic deployment of high-profile yet relatable candidates like Baddrol Bakhtiar and Radzi Mat Din allowed PN to enhance its grassroots strategy while emphasising local representation and identity. This approach resonated particularly well with young voters and rural communities, creating a strong connection to candidates such as Baddrol. His background as a celebrated football player rooted in a *kampung* (village) setting deeply appealed to the electorate. These carefully crafted candidate selections bolstered PN's grassroots appeal and played a critical role in weakening entrenched

political strongholds, setting the stage for one of Kedah's most significant electoral shifts.

Building on this momentum, PN's sweeping victory was further reinforced by the defeat of several prominent leaders from PH and BN, highlighting the coalition's ability to reshape Kedah's political landscape (Table 2). Mahdzir Khalid, Chairman of BN Kedah, failed in his bid to reclaim the DUN Pedu seat, losing to incumbent Mohd Radzi Mat Amin by a significant margin of 6, 373 votes. Similarly, Mahfuz Omar, Chairman of PH Kedah, suffered a resounding defeat in DUN Alor Mengkudu to Radzi Mat Din, with a majority of 10,104 votes. The defeat of Tan Kok Yew, Chairman of DAP Kedah, further highlighted the scale of PN's triumph. Losing in DUN Derga to Bersatu's Muhammad Amri Wahab, a political newcomer, Tan's loss was particularly symbolic. Muhammad Amri made history as the first Malay candidate to win the DUN

Table 2

The defeated prominent leaders from PH and BN in the 2023 Kedah State Elections

Name	Position	Constituency (DUN)	Winning Candidate	Winning Party (PN)	Majority Votes
Mahdzir Khalid	Chairman of BN Kedah	Pedu	Mohd Radzi Mat Amin	PAS	6,373
Mahfuz Omar	Chairman of PH Kedah	Alor Mengkudu	Radzi Mat Din	PAS	10,104
Ismail Salleh	Chairman of Amanah Kedah	Pengkalan Kundor	Mardhiyyah Johari	PAS	22,349
Tan Kok Yew	Chairman of DAP Kedah	Derga	Muhammad Amri Wahab	Bersatu	14,433
Zamri Yusof	Former Opposition Leader of Kedah DUN	Suka Menanti (previously was Bakar Bata)	Dzowahir Ab. Ghani	Bersatu	18,396

Derga seat in 30 years. Among the 47 seats contested by DAP nationwide, Derga was the only seat the party lost, illustrating the deep inroads PN made into constituencies once considered impenetrable. These outcomes reflect the effectiveness of PN's grassroots strategy and the populist framing that enabled the coalition to capitalize on shifting voter sentiments, culminating in a historic victory in Kedah.

The 2023 Kedah state elections signify a profound transformation in the state's political landscape. PN's overwhelming victory consolidated its status as the dominant coalition. This outcome reflects the operationalisation of populist strategy under Sanusi. The strategy drew on populist roots, identity-based appeals, symbolic rhetoric, and grassroots mobilisation. These elements align with scholarly debates on populism that emphasise anti-elitist framing and cultural identity (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Laclau, 2005). In Malaysia, this pattern corresponds with ethno-religious mobilisation analysed by Halim and Azhari (2020). It also echoes Weiss's (2020) observation that personalisation often outweighs ideological coherence. Sanusi's anak kampung persona illustrates how localised cultural symbols embed populist discourse in Malaysia's political context, shaping its capacity to attract mass support.

Penang: PAS's Growing Presence in Malay-majority Areas

In addition to the transformative victory in Kedah, the 2023 state elections underscored a significant, albeit less dramatic, development in neighbouring Penang. Despite Penang's historical status as a PH stronghold, the influence of PN began to permeate the northern, Malay-majority districts of the state. The results showed an increasing presence of PAS, as the party expanded its representation to seven seats, up from only two in the previous election. In total, PN secured 11 seats in the Penang State Assembly, with PAS and its coalition partner, Bersatu, making notable inroads into what had long been regarded as a political domain dominated by DAP and BN.

Table 3

Penang State Assembly results (Malay-majority Areas: 2013–2023)

Election	PAS/PN Seats	PR/PH Seats*	BN Seats
GE13 (2013)	1	29	10
GE14 (2018)	1	37	2
State Election 2023	11	27	2

Source: Election Commission of Malaysia (2013, 2018, 2023)
Note. *Without PAS

Out of the 11 seats won by PN, 10 were captured from incumbents. These included three seats previously held by BN (Permatang Berangan, Sungai Dua, and Telok Bahang) and one by Amanah (Permatang Pasir). PN also seized six seats from PKR: Penanti, Seberang Jaya, Telok Ayer Tawar, Pinang Tunggal, Sungai Bakap, and Pulau Betong. This sweeping

performance reflects a strategic realignment within Penang's northern constituencies, with Malay voters shifting their support decisively toward PAS and Bersatu (see Table 4).

Sanusi's populist approach may have acted as one accelerant in this electoral shift, though his role is best understood within a wider configuration of socio-political forces. PAS's advance in Penang was facilitated by its capacity to organise around Malay-Muslim identity, local discontent, and disaffection toward federal political elites. These dynamics collectively enabled the party to secure political ground in a state once firmly associated with PH and, before that, BN.

The growing presence of PAS in Penang, particularly in districts with substantial Malay populations, reflects the effectiveness of populist appeals shaped by anti-DAP sentiment, especially in light of PH and UMNO now operating within the same coalition as DAP. Grassroots mobilisation, local pride, and defiance toward central authority emerged as recurring elements that resonated with segments of the electorate unsettled by established political

arrangements. Similar to developments in Kedah, this trajectory also illustrates the operation of classical Malay populism in mobilising Malay support in Penang.

CONCLUSION

This study characterises the Malay populist, or what may be termed a "classical Malay populist," through an analysis of Muhammad Sanusi's political behaviour during the 2023 state elections. His trajectory demonstrates how identity-based appeals, symbolic gestures, anti-elitist narratives, and digital mobilisation can be articulated within a distinct Malay context, particularly in northern Malaysia. The notion of "classical Malay populism" is used as an analytical device to capture this interplay, without elevating the label into a form of personal branding.

The 2023 Kedah elections illustrate the capacity of populism to recalibrate political alignments, displace entrenched parties, and reshape voter loyalties, particularly among the Malay electorate. These developments reveal both the possibilities and risks of populist strategies: they can mobilise grassroots aspirations and redistribute

Table 4

Seats captured by PN in the 2023 Penang State Elections

Party	Total Seats Won	Seats Captured	Previous Incumbent
PAS	7	Permatang Berangan, Sungai Dua, Telok Bahang	BN
		Permatang Pasir	Amanah
		Penanti, Seberang Jaya, Telok Ayer Tawar	PKR
Bersatu	4	Pinang Tunggal, Sungai Bakap, Pulau Betong, Telok Ayer Tawar	PKR

Source: Election Commission of Malaysia (2013, 2018, 2023)

political capital, yet also erode institutional resilience and deepen polarisation in a plural society. Malaysia's experience therefore provides a critical vantage point for understanding the role of populism in transforming political landscapes in Southeast Asia.

The study nonetheless faces limitations in fully defining the contours of "classical Malay populism." The concept remains provisional, shaped by a single case and specific regional context. Broader comparative research across states and leaders is needed to test its applicability and to distinguish between transient electoral tactics and enduring populist structures. Future studies should also explore how classical Malay populism interacts with multiethnic dynamics, institutional constraints, and global populist currents, thereby refining the framework and situating it more firmly within comparative populism scholarship.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

REFERENCES

Arditi, B. (2007). *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation*. Edinburgh University Press.

Demuru, P. (2021). Gastropopulism: a sociosemiotic analysis of politicians posing as "the everyday man" via food posts on social media. *Social Semiotics*, *31*(3), 507–527. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2021.1930800

Dermawan, A. (2023, June 1). Rayer, DAP lapor polis dakwaan Sanusi status P Pinang [Rayer and DAP file police report over Sanusi's claim on Penang's status]. *Berita Harian*. https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2023/06/1108941/rayer-dap-lapor-polis-dakwaan-sanusi-status-p-pinang

Election Commission of Malaysia. (2013). *Laporan Pilihan Raya Umum ke-13* [13th General Election Report]. Election Commission of Malaysia. Retrieved from https://www.spr.gov.my

Election Commission of Malaysia. (2018). *Laporan Pilihan Raya Umum ke-14* [14th General Election Report]. Election Commission of Malaysia. Retrieved from https://www.spr.gov.my

Election Commission of Malaysia. (2023). *Laporan Pilihan Raya Negeri 2023* [2023 State Election Report]. Election Commission of Malaysia. Retrieved from https://www.spr.gov.my

Ezreen, H. (2023, August 23). Isu gurauan pukul kepala wanita: Lepuk dengan kertas, bukannya kayu" – Sanusi [The issue of jokingly hitting a woman on the head: "Tapped with paper, not wood" – Sanusi]. *The Rakyat Post*. https://www.therakyatpost.com/trpbm/2023/08/23/isu-gurauan-pukul-kepala-wanita-lepuk-dengan-kertas-bukannya-kayu-sanusi/

Fong, F. (2021, November 16). TMJ sends Kedah MB McDonald's in jibe over local football draw: Outspoken Malaysian royalty and Kedah MB in a friendly war of words. *The Rakyat Post*. https://www.therakyatpost.com/fun/2021/11/16/tmj-sends-kedah-mb-mcdonalds-in-jibe-over-local-football-draw/

Gonzales, A.K.A. (2023), Populist leaders in the Philippines and Malaysia, Shukri, S. (Ed.) *Pandemic, Politics, and a Fairer*

Society in Southeast Asia: A Malaysian Perspective (*Diverse Perspectives on Creating a Fairer Society*), Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 39-52. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80455-588-020231004

Halim, F. A., & Azhari, A. (2020). Chapter 8 the changing nature of populism in Malaysia. In *Populism in Asian Democracies*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004444461_010

Hewison, K. (2017). Reluctant populists: Learning populism in Thailand. *International Political Science Review*, *38*(4), 426-440. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512117692801

Inglehart, R., & Norris, P. (2016). *Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash*. Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper Series.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. Verso.

Malaysia Gazette. (2023, July 17). Sultan Selangor anggap kenyataan Sanusi hina institusi diraja [Sultan of Selangor considers Sanusi's statement an insult to the royal institution]. *Malaysia Gazette*. https://malaysiagazette.com/2023/07/17/sultan-selangor-anggap-kenyataan-sanusi-hina-institusi-diraja/

Malaysiakini. (2023, August 1). Sanusi angkat tangan 'lawan Anwar' jadi trend kempen [Sanusi raises hand 'against Anwar' becomes a campaign trend]. *Malaysiakini*. https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/676362

Mietzner, M. (2014, April 27). Jokowi: Rise of a polite populist. *Inside Indonesia*. https://www.insideindonesia.org/jokowi-rise-of-a-polite-populist

Mietzner, M. (2015). *Reinventing Asian populism: Jokowi's rise, democracy, and political contestation in Indonesia* (Vol. 72). East-West Center.

Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Muhammad Fahmi, M.R. (2023, August 10). *Personal interview*.

Muhammad Sanusi Md. Nor. (2023, June 12). *You don't know anything about being poor, Sanusi tells Anwar*. Focus Malaysia. https://focusmalaysia.my/you-dont-know-anything-about-being-poor-sanusi-tells-anwar

Muhammad Sanusi, M. N. [@Muhammad Sanusi Md. Nor]. (n.d.). *Home* [Facebook profile]. Facebook. Retrieved January 5, 2025, from https://www.facebook.com/N24MuhammadSanusiMdNor

Müller, J.W. (2016). *What is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Noorazura, A.R. (2023, May 29). Sanusi dakwa tiada sempadan antara Kedah-Pulau Pinang [Sanusi claims no boundary exists between Kedah and Penang]. *Berita Harian*. https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2023/05/1107656/sanusi-dakwa-tiada-sempadan-antara-kedah-pulau-pinang

Plagemann, J. & Ufen, A. (2017). Varieties of Populism in Asia, GIGA *Focus Asia*, 7, Hamburg: German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-54923-5

Qistina, S. (2023, July 17). Sanusi's remarks an insult to the royal institution, decrees Selangor Sultan. *New Straits Times*. https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/07/931866/sanusis-remarks-insult-royal-institution-decrees-selangor-sultan

Sandu, T., & DI Ruzza, A. (2025). Football and right-wing populisms: *S. Berlusconi* and *G. Becali*. *Soccer & Society*, 26(2), 328-336. https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2024.2446065

Shah Mohd Akmal, A.H. (2020). Institusi Monarki Johor: Kajian Kes di Era Najib Razak (2009-

2018) dan Mahathir Mohamad (2018-2020) [The Johor Monarchy Institution: A Case Study during the Najib Razak (2009-2018) and Mahathir Mohamad (2018-2020) Eras] (Master's thesis). Political Science Program, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Shah, S. (2019). Populist Politics in the New Malaysia. *New Diversities, 21*(2), 53-67 https://doi.org/10.58002/vk9f-g124

Stavrakakis, Y., & Katsambekis, G. (2014). Left-wing populism in the European periphery: The case of SYRIZA. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *19*(2), 119-142. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.909266

Shukri, S. (2024). *Elite populism and Malay political leaders in Malaysia. Palgrave Macmillan*. Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6301-6

Tan, B. (2022, May 23). TMJ challenges Kedah MB to disclose individual who allegedly 'controls' M-League. *Malay Mail.* Retrieved from https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/05/23/tmj-challenges-kedah-mb-to-disclose-individual-who-allegedly-controls-m-league/8348

Thompson, M. R. (2021). Duterte's violent populism: Mass murder, political legitimacy and the "Death of Development" in the Philippines. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *52*(3), 403-428. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2021.1910859

Viedrov, O. (2023). Back-to-normality outsiders: Zelensky's technocratic populism, 2019-2021. *East European Politics*, *39*(3), 478-501. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2146092

Webber, J. (2023). Understanding Populism. *Social & Legal Studies*, *32*(6), 849-876. https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639231156144

Weiss, M. L. (2020). The limits of "populism": How Malaysia misses the mark and why that matters. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, 39*(2), 207-226. https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420935555

Yilmaz, I., Bachtiar, H., Smith, C., & Shakil, K. (2024, March 15). Fluctuating populism: Prabowo's everchanging populism across the Indonesian elections. *Populism & Politics.* European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). https://doi.org/10.55271/pp0030

Zakaraya, S. Z. (2023, August 7). Sanusi main bola sepak disaksikan lebih 1,000 penyokong [Sanusi plays football watched by over 1,000 supporters]. *Sinar Harian*. https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/272488/edisi/utara/sanusi-main-bola-sepak-disaksikan-lebih-1000-penyokong