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### WATER POLITICS AND POPULIST GOVERNANCE IN MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY OF MUHAMMAD SANUSI MD NOR ADMINISTRATION IN KEDAH, 2020-2024

*(Politik Air dan Pemerintahan Populis di Malaysia: Kajian Kes Pentadbiran  
Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor di Kedah, 2020–2024)*

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#### ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the intersection between water governance and populist political strategies in Malaysia by focusing on the administration of Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, the Chief Minister of Kedah from 2020 to 2024. The study investigates how the issue of inter-state water disputes particularly Kedah's demand for payment from Penang for raw water from Sungai Muda has been politicised and deployed as a populist narrative to consolidate political legitimacy. Drawing on the hydro-hegemony framework and theories of resource nationalism, I argue that Sanusi's administration strategically framed water not merely as a resource, but as a symbol of state sovereignty and economic justice. Through qualitative content analysis of

public speeches, policy documents, and media coverage between 2020 and 2024, this study reveals how water politics in Kedah reflect deeper tensions in Malaysia's federal-state dynamics and the absence of a coherent legal framework for transboundary water governance. I demonstrate that the water discourse under Sanusi's leadership illustrates a distinctive form of populist governance where rhetorical appeals to state rights, economic victimhood, and resource control are mobilised to assert autonomy within a fragmented federal structure. The findings contribute to broader discussions on environmental populism, subnational resource disputes, and the politicisation of infrastructure in emerging democracies. This study also highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive federal policy on water-sharing agreements to prevent political exploitation of vital resources.

**Keywords:** Governance, Hydro-hegemony, Inter-state disputes, Malaysia, , Muhamad Sanusi Md Nor, Populist governance

## INTRODUCTION

In an era where access to water is becoming increasingly politicised, the management of water resources no longer revolves solely around technical expertise or ecological sustainability, but is deeply entangled with questions of sovereignty, identity, and populist governance (Mahdavi, 2024). In my opinion, Malaysia presents a particularly instructive case for understanding how water an essential and finite resource has evolved into a tool of political narrative, especially within subnational contestations (Abdullah & Zakarya, 2022). One of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon is found in the administration of Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, the Chief Minister of Kedah, whose tenure since 2020 has been marked by a series of populist maneuvers surrounding water issues. Through his repeated demands that Penang pay for raw water extracted from Sungai Muda, Sanusi has transformed a longstanding inter-state water dispute into a potent symbol of Kedah's victimhood and marginalisation within Malaysia's federal system (Abdullah et al., 2024).

I personally believe that this transformation of water into a populist political symbol warrants deeper scrutiny, especially in light of Malaysia's post-colonial legacy and constitutional framework. Under Article 74(2) of the Federal Constitution, natural resources such as water fall under the jurisdiction of individual states, creating a fragmented system where inter-state water management lacks a coherent federal mechanism (Wan Husain, 2022). Historically, this structure is a colonial inheritance. During the British colonial period, administrative boundaries were drawn with economic extraction in mind not ecological logic (Beattie, 2012). As a result, rivers like Sungai Muda, which flow across Kedah, Perlis and into Pulau Pinang, became transboundary resources without any formal legal or institutional structure for equitable sharing (Abdullah, 2024). The Muda Dam, constructed in 1969 primarily to support the Muda Agricultural Development Authority (MADA), also became the starting point for a long-term dependency of downstream states like Penang on Kedah's upstream water infrastructure (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2018).

**Figure 1**

*Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, Chief Minister of Kedah (2020–present)*



Source: Sinar Harian. (2017). Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor.  
<https://stgpru.sinarharian.com.my/calon/2448/MUHAMMAD-SANUSI-MD-NOR>

For me, what is particularly significant in Sanusi's case is how he reframes this structural inequality as a form of moral and economic injustice against Kedah. In multiple public speeches and political statements, Sanusi asserts that while Kedah bears the cost of preserving water catchment areas such as Ulu Muda, states like Pulau Pinang enjoy the benefits without any financial or ecological contribution (Wan Mansor, 2020). This rhetoric framed in terms of justice, sovereignty, and resource nationalism has found strong resonance among Kedah's electorate, especially in rural and economically marginal constituencies. In this context, water becomes more than just a commodity or a natural right; it becomes a medium through which political legitimacy is constructed and contested.

I see this populist appropriation of water politics not as an isolated phenomenon but as part of a broader trend of subnational populism in Malaysia. Sanusi's administration exemplifies how regional leaders, particularly those from opposition-led states, leverage state-based narratives of marginalisation to contest federal authority and mobilise support. His portrayal of Kedah as an aggrieved upstream state aligns with what scholars of environmental populism have identified as the strategic use of ecological grievances to construct anti-elite, anti-federal political platforms (Wan Mansor, 2021). What makes the case of Kedah unique, however, is the way in which technical issues of water governance such as the maintenance of raw water intake points or negotiations over inter-state pricing are interwoven with emotive appeals to heritage, identity, and injustice. This article aims to explore how water politics under Sanusi's administration reveals the evolving nature of populist governance in Malaysia, particularly

through the lens of subnational resistance, ecological sovereignty, and resource justice. I argue that the case of Kedah illustrates how water, as a contested resource, offers a unique vantage point from which to analyse the tensions between federalism, populism, and ecological responsibility in contemporary Malaysia.

**Figure 2**

*Sungai Muda, Kedah, Malaysia*



**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review for this article explores the intersection between water governance, populist political narratives, and inter-state power asymmetries within a federal system. In seeking to understand the politicisation of water by the Kedah state government under Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, I build upon three main bodies of literature: hydro-hegemony and transboundary water conflict, populist governance in subnational politics, and federalism in natural resource management, both within Malaysia and in comparative international contexts.

To begin with, this article is framed by the Hydro-Hegemony Framework, a theoretical model developed by Zeitoun and Warner (2006), which explains how control over water resources is exercised through a combination of physical power, bargaining capabilities, and narrative construction. This model is particularly useful in analysing the political behaviour of upstream states that use their control over water flows to influence or pressure downstream actors. In the case of Kedah, I view Sanusi's repeated demands for payment from Penang not only as a reflection of state sovereignty claims but also as a strategic deployment of narrative power.

Literature within this framework, such as Cascão (2009) and Mirumachi (2015), has demonstrated how water scarcity and infrastructural dependency are often reframed by upstream states into narratives of victimhood, justice, or historical entitlement—narratives that mirror those employed by Sanusi in his public statements.

The second body of literature deals with the political populism of subnational leaders. Authors such as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) and Taggart (2004) emphasise that populism is not confined to national leaders but often flourishes at the sub-state level, especially when leaders are positioned in adversarial relationships with central governments. I found that Sanusi's political discourse fits the pattern of what Canovan (1999) describes as "populism of the periphery" in which provincial leaders present themselves as defenders of local interests against distant and unaccountable federal elites. Sanusi's framing of Kedah as a "victim state" under a biased federal system resonates with this literature, demonstrating how environmental grievances can be appropriated for populist mobilisation. In this regard, I also refer to the works of Akbarzadeh, Mamouri, Bashirov & Yilmaz (2025) who studies how populist actors use resource narratives to consolidate electoral support, particularly in economically underdeveloped and rural regions.

The third strand of literature that grounds this study concerns federalism and intergovernmental relations in resource management. Classic federalist theorists such as Elazar (1987) and Watts (1998) underscore that federal systems often suffer from coordination problems, particularly when natural resources cross state borders. In Malaysia, this issue is magnified by the constitutional allocation of power, where Article 74(2) of the Federal Constitution grants states exclusive rights over land and water resources. However, literature such as Abdullah (2019) (2024) argue that this legal structure lacks an effective conflict-resolution mechanism or institutional platform for shared management of cross-border resources. This legal vacuum creates fertile ground for political disputes such as the Sungai Muda conflict. In analysing this issue, I also examine the Kedah Water Resources Enactment 2008 and the Penang Water Supply Corporation's institutional position, which further illuminate the fragmented governance of water in Malaysia.

This article also draws from literature on international transboundary water conflicts to place the Malaysian case within a broader comparative framework. Studies such as Waterbury (2002) on the Nile River conflict and Salman and Uprety (2021) on the Indus Waters Treaty show how upstream-downstream power dynamics often become flashpoints for political tension, particularly in the absence of clear institutional frameworks for benefit-sharing. The case of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project where a smaller upstream country sells water to a more powerful downstream nation resembles, in a symbolic sense, Kedah's position relative to Penang. Turton and Ashton (2008) highlight how such asymmetries can be politically exploited by upstream actors seeking leverage, a phenomenon I observe in Sanusi's public rhetoric.

From the ecological perspective, literature on environmental sustainability and catchment management adds a critical layer to the understanding of the Kedah-Penang water dispute. Research by Weng (2005) underscores the importance of the Ulu Muda forest reserve as a key water catchment area that sustains the flow of Sungai Muda. Yacob (2002) argue that economic pressures on upstream states like Kedah combined with the absence of compensation from downstream beneficiaries, lead to unsustainable practices such as logging and land

clearing. The literature therefore highlights the urgent need for ecological fiscal transfers or Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes. Wunder (2005) provide examples from Latin America, where PES frameworks are used to compensate upstream communities for protecting watershed services. I find that this literature provides a useful foundation for proposing a formalised compensation mechanism between Kedah and Penang, one that could mitigate ecological degradation while reducing political tension.

Lastly, this study is informed by emerging literature on infrastructure populism, which looks at how major infrastructure (such as dams, pipelines, and water supply systems) are politicised in developing countries. Studies by Corbet & Larkin (2019) and Anand (2017) show how infrastructure becomes a medium through which states perform power, legitimacy, and modernity. In Kedah's case, the mobilisation of the water infrastructure issue such as the delay in upgrading LRA Sungai Limau or the proposal to sell treated water to Penang serves not only a technical function but also a symbolic one (Abdullah et al., 2024; Hashim, 2025). I argue that Sanusi's administration uses water infrastructure as a political narrative to express Kedah's development grievances and to challenge federal neglect.

Taken together, this literature review provides a comprehensive analytical foundation for this article. It brings together theoretical insights from hydro-politics, populism studies, federal-state legal frameworks, and ecological economics. By doing so, it enables a multi-dimensional reading of Sanusi's water politics not merely as a reflection of state rivalry, but as a strategic articulation of populist resistance, ecological injustice, and institutional fragmentation in Malaysia's water governance landscape. This literature ultimately supports the article's goal of proposing a more integrated and equitable framework for transboundary water resource management in Malaysia.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology to analyse the nexus between water politics and populist governance in Malaysia, with specific attention to the administration of Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor in the state of Kedah from 2020 to 2024. Rooted in the interpretivist tradition, this research seeks to explore how water-related issues are discursively constructed, politically mobilised, and institutionally governed within a federal system characterised by asymmetrical power relations. The single-case design is employed to provide an in-depth analysis of Kedah as an upstream state, with embedded sub-units focusing on Sanusi's political rhetoric, inter-state disputes with Penang, legal-institutional arrangements, and ecological management practices.

Data for this study is collected through document analysis, critical discourse analysis, and comparative policy review. Primary sources were purposively selected based on their salience in public discourse and their relevance to inter-state water conflict and populist mobilisation. These include parliamentary records, official statements by the Menteri Besar published between 2020 and 2024, legal documents such as Article 74(2) of the Federal Constitution, the Kedah Water Resources Enactment 2008, and selected news articles from *Sinar Harian*, *The Star*, and *Utusan Malaysia*. Only speeches, laws, and media reports that directly addressed themes of water sovereignty, compensation, inter-state dispute, and infrastructure delays were

included. In addition, media reports are systematically analysed to examine how narratives of victimhood, sovereignty, and justice are constructed and disseminated to the public.

The discourse analysis follows the critical framework outlined by Fairclough (1995), allowing for an exploration of the language of power and populism in environmental governance. This includes three levels of analysis: textual (lexical and rhetorical choices), discursive (production and circulation of meanings across institutions), and social (structural context of federal-state tensions and ecological injustice). This layered approach allows the study to uncover the symbolic work performed by water-related discourse and the institutional voids that enable its politicisation.

To further contextualise the Malaysian case, international literature and policy experiences are reviewed, particularly the Nile River conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia, and the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. These comparative examples provide insights into how upstream-downstream disputes unfold in the absence of robust institutional frameworks for benefit sharing.

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates the Hydro-Hegemony Framework by Zeitoun and Warner (2006), which explains how upstream states deploy physical, bargaining, and discursive power to control water flows, with Populist Governance Theory (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), which is applied to analyse how Sanusi's administration utilises environmental grievances as populist capital. This dual-theoretical lens enables the study to capture both the material and symbolic dimensions of water politics in Kedah.

The research acknowledges certain limitations, particularly the availability of disaggregated data at the state level and the sensitivity of political commentary on inter-state disputes. Nevertheless, the triangulation of data sources and the use of well-established analytical frameworks ensure that the research maintains a high degree of academic rigour. Ultimately, this methodological approach allows for a holistic examination of how water governance in Malaysia is shaped not merely by technical or ecological considerations, but by evolving configurations of power, identity, and populist performance at the subnational level.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **Water as a Political Narrative: From Resource Management to Populist Mobilisation**

Water is often perceived as a technical or environmental issue, yet in the context of Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor's administration in Kedah, I argue that it has been transformed into a potent political narrative (Wan Mansor, 2020; Ulatowski & Lumsden, 2024). The demand for compensation from Penang for raw water drawn from the Muda River was not merely a fiscal proposition, but part of a broader populist strategy that repositions water as a symbol of territorial dignity, economic injustice, and political awakening. Within this frame, I see how water has become a medium through which historical grievances, local identity, and structural inequality are articulated and mobilised (Mehta, 2025). This aligns closely with the principles of the Hydro-Hegemony Framework (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006), where upstream

actors use a combination of geographical advantage, rhetorical dominance, and institutional voids to assert control over transboundary water flows.

In many of his speeches and media statements, Sanusi portrays Kedah as a state that “sacrifices to protect the source” while others downstream “reap the benefits.” (Abdullah et al, 2024; Wan Mansor, 2021). This narrative reframes water from being a shared natural resource to a vehicle for asserting moral and political claims (Valero et al., 2023). I see this as a form of resource-based populism, where the symbolic capital of water is used to rally support by constructing a dichotomy between the oppressed (the upstream state) and the privileged (the downstream state and federal authorities). Such framing is consistent with the model of Populist Governance outlined by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), where political leaders utilise a simplified, emotionally charged narrative to present themselves as defenders of the people against a negligent elite.

Water also functions as a key platform in the construction of Sanusi’s public persona as a leader who is assertive, principled, and uncompromising. I observe that water issues are deployed not only to challenge federal bureaucracy, but also to elevate Kedah’s regional identity and agency. In this context, water serves as a narrative infrastructure, not merely as pipelines and dams, but as a symbolic structure that connects material grievances with collective emotion. Studies such as those by Anand (2017) and Corbet & Larkin (2019) have shown how infrastructure can be repurposed by political actors to convey state power, legitimacy, and modernity. Sanusi’s water discourse echoes this approach by transforming state-level development issues into a moral struggle for recognition and fairness.

However, I find that this populist reframing also obscures the deeper structural challenges of water governance in Kedah. Critical issues such as transparency in procurement, maintenance of rural water infrastructure, and environmental degradation in Ulu Muda are rarely addressed substantively (Abdullah, 2021: *Penyata Rasmi Parlimen*, 2020). Instead, blame is often redirected toward external actors: the federal government, bureaucratic or ungrateful downstream states. From a hydro-hegemonic perspective, this demonstrates how power can be asserted not just through institutional control or coercion, but by shaping public perceptions of legitimacy, responsibility, and entitlement.

I argue that this strategy is particularly effective in Malaysia’s post-2020 political landscape, where state-federal tensions have become more visible and politicised (Abdullah et al, 2022). Within this environment, water serves as a platform to contest the federal order and articulate local resistance. Sanusi’s framing of water as a symbol of Kedah’s marginalisation enables him to reposition the state not as dependent, but as historically burdened and morally superior. In this context, water is no longer neutral, it is a symbolic battlefield embedded with narratives of injustice, sovereignty, and redemption. Through this process, water becomes central not just to governance, but to the performance of populist legitimacy and the renegotiation of state identity within Malaysia’s fragmented federal framework.

### **Sovereignty, Federalism, and Legal Gaps in Inter-State Water Governance**

Water governance in Malaysia is not merely a matter of technical capacity or environmental policy; it is deeply shaped by the structure of federalism and the legacy of territorial

sovereignty granted to states under the Federal Constitution (Ujang et al., 2022). In my view, the conflict over raw water extraction from Sungai Muda between Kedah and Penang reveals a deeper legal and institutional vacuum in managing inter-state resources (Abdullah et al, 2024). The repeated assertion by Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor that Kedah has exclusive rights over upstream water sources is not merely a political strategy, it reflects a constitutional reality embedded in Article 74(2) of the Federal Constitution, which grants states control over land, forests, and water within their territories (Khalid, 2018). However, while this clause establishes state sovereignty, it does not provide a clear legal mechanism for resolving disputes or distributing responsibilities between upstream and downstream actors (Kerajaan Negeri Kedah, 2008).

I find that this legal silence creates a condition of ambiguity that allows political actors to frame resource control through moral and populist lenses. In the case of Kedah, the lack of a binding federal instrument on water-sharing has enabled Sanusi to claim moral ownership of *Sungai Muda*, portraying Kedah as a guardian burdened with ecological responsibilities but deprived of fiscal support (Wan Mansor, 2020). This is compounded by the fact that Malaysia lacks a national water law that governs cross-border rivers or mandates benefit-sharing agreements between states. The Water Services Industry Act 2006 (WSIA), which centralised treated water services under SPAN and federal oversight, excludes raw water, leaving a critical gap in regulation (Abd Rani et al, 2024: Ujang et al., 2022). I see this as a structural flaw that not only weakens institutional coordination but also provides fertile ground for rhetorical escalations at the subnational level.

The tension between legal sovereignty and ecological interdependence is further aggravated by Malaysia's fragmented water governance framework. States such as Kedah and Penang have their own enactments Kedah Water Resources Enactment 2008 and the administrative machinery of Perbadanan Bekalan Air Pulau Pinang (PBAPP) yet there is no overarching federal institution tasked with mediating between them in cases of conflict (Abdullah et al., 2024: Kerajaan Negeri Kedah, 2008). As a result, political claims over water remain unmediated, determined largely by intergovernmental goodwill or public pressure. I observe that this has led to a performative politics of sovereignty, where state leaders assert jurisdictional rights without formal accountability structures. In this vacuum, legal instruments are not merely tools of governance, but symbols of state identity and leverage in federal negotiations.

Furthermore, I find that the federal-state dynamic is shaped not only by legal design but also by administrative asymmetries. States like Kedah, which depend on federal allocations for major infrastructure upgrades, are caught in a paradox they are constitutionally sovereign over water but financially dependent on the federal government (Abdullah, 2019). This paradox is frequently weaponised in political discourse. Sanusi, for instance, regularly criticises the federal government for delays in approving or funding critical projects such as the LRA Sungai Limau dan LRA Bukit Selambau upgrade, portraying such bottlenecks as part of a broader narrative of federal neglect (Hashim, 2025). This strategy resonates with the populist governance model, where administrative frustration is reframed as moral injustice.

In this context, I argue that Malaysian federalism while appearing decentralised in legal form operates within a system of asymmetric capacity, where legal sovereignty is not matched by fiscal or institutional autonomy. The result is a highly politicised space in which disputes over

water become more than administrative disagreements; they become battlegrounds for asserting regional pride and resistance. This explains why Sanusi's administration has consistently framed Kedah's role as one of sacrifice and struggle, while downstream states like Penang are cast as beneficiaries who evade their ecological and moral obligations. Without a federal framework to adjudicate these competing claims, I believe that water will continue to serve as a proxy for deeper tensions within the federation tensions between the letter of constitutional sovereignty and the lived realities of environmental interdependence.

In my view, this situation calls for a rethinking of the federal model in relation to resource governance. The Sungai Muda case illustrates that in the absence of a legal regime for inter-state benefit sharing, political narratives will inevitably fill the void, often leading to polarisation and inefficiency. What is required is not merely legal reform, but institutional imagination: the creation of inter-state water councils, independent arbitration mechanisms, and incentive structures for cooperation. Without these, I believe Malaysia will remain vulnerable to recurring disputes over shared resources disputes that are less about water itself than about the competing sovereignties it symbolises.

### **Sanusi's Hydro-Political Strategy: Assertion of Upstream Power and Demand for Compensation**

In the discourse of inter-state water management, I see geographical position not merely as a physical fact, but as a strategic instrument of power. In the case of the Muda River, Kedah as the upstream state, possesses a natural advantage that enables it to shape narratives, dictate the terms of negotiation, and assert claims with greater intensity (Lai et al., 2019). Under the administration of Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, I observe that this positional advantage has been transformed into a hydro-political strategy rooted in geography, environmental stewardship, and moral justification. Within this strategy, water is not only framed as a resource, but as a medium to restructure power relations between states and to legitimise demands for compensation from Penang.

Kedah's long-standing demand that Penang pay for the raw water drawn from the Muda River is not new. However, under Sanusi's leadership, I find that this demand has evolved from a bureaucratic request into a moral and nationalistic campaign. It is now framed as a matter of dignity and fairness, an effort to restore justice to an upstream state that has long "sacrificed" for the benefit of more developed downstream states. In numerous public addresses, Sanusi has emphasised that Kedah protects vital catchment areas such as Ulu Muda, bears the ecological burden of conservation, and faces developmental pressures in the process yet receives no financial compensation or recognition. I interpret this as a classic exercise of hydro-hegemony, where the upstream actor uses a blend of geographic, institutional, and discursive power to assert dominance over a shared water source (Abdullah et al., 2024).

What is particularly striking to me is how Sanusi has positioned this issue as a struggle of the rural periphery against federal and economic centralisation. Kedah is portrayed as humble, loyal, and self-sufficient, yet systematically marginalised. Penang, by contrast, is depicted as affluent, ungrateful, and exploitative. Within this dichotomy, water becomes the battleground between two identities: one rooted in sacrifice and ecological justice, and the other in technocratic privilege and economic strength. Sanusi's compensation demands are thus not

based solely on hydrological data or governance metrics, but are embedded in a highly emotional, localised, and identity-driven narrative one that resonates powerfully in Malaysia's increasingly fragmented political landscape.

Yet I also recognise that this strategy carries inherent risks. While Sanusi successfully asserts Kedah's upstream power and demands recognition, his approach simultaneously distances the possibility of inter-state cooperation. His emphasis on unilateral moral claims, rather than mutual governance frameworks, complicates efforts to establish inclusive mechanisms such as river basin councils or Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes. I find that upstream power exercised without cooperative negotiation structures is likely to escalate inter-state tensions and entrench political polarisation. The absence of a formal federal framework for compensation leaves such disputes vulnerable to populist escalation, where public support is mobilised not for institutional reform but for symbolic confrontation (Wunder, 2005).

Nevertheless, I do not dismiss Sanusi's strategy as merely populist rhetoric. In a federal system that lacks formal pathways for upstream states to claim compensation, such hydro-political strategies become a form of counter-narrative against structural imbalance. I view Sanusi's manoeuvres as a form of resource-based populism, grounded in real institutional voids and asymmetrical burdens. It is not only a political strategy, but a structural response to the lack of legal mechanisms that would otherwise legitimise Kedah's claims.

To me, the central question is not whether Kedah deserves compensation but how such claims can be channelled into a legitimate, sustainable, and cooperative system. In the absence of a formal framework such as joint river basin governance plans or federal water arbitration institutions, Kedah's demands will remain trapped in cycles of political posturing, dependent on momentary public sentiment or partisan alignment. I argue that Sanusi's hydro-political strategy should not be dismissed as reckless assertiveness, but understood as a symptom of Malaysia's fragmented federal resource governance, a call for reform as much as a claim for justice.

### **Infrastructure, Delays, and Blame Politics in Populist Water Discourse**

Infrastructure is often perceived as a technical concern an issue of engineering, logistics, and budgetary allocation. However, I believe that infrastructure also carries profound political meanings, especially when it involves essential services such as water supply. In the case of Kedah, the delay in upgrading the LRA Sungai Limau dan LRA Bukit Selambau has, in my view, been strategically repurposed by Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor as a discursive platform to criticise the Federal Government and to enhance his political standing as a leader who "speaks truth to power." In this context, infrastructure is no longer merely about public service delivery, it becomes a symbolic site within a broader populist strategy, where inefficiencies and delays are framed as evidence of systemic injustice against rural states (Hashim, 2025).

Sanusi has repeatedly framed the LRA project not only as a necessity for Kedah's water security but as a symptom of neglect by federal authorities. I find that his narrative is constructed around the idea that despite Kedah's loyalty to the federation, its needs are consistently sidelined. The delay in federal approvals is presented not as a bureaucratic matter, but as a manifestation of structural discrimination against less affluent states. In this framing,

the state becomes a victim of a technocratic and politically biased central government. I interpret this as a form of blame politics, where the failure of complex administrative processes is reduced to a simple moral narrative: Kedah waits, and the Federal Government does not care.

This narrative aligns with broader models of populist governance, where populist actors use delays in infrastructure as a means to attack state institutions and present themselves as champions of the people against an indifferent elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In the Malaysian context, Sanusi positions Kedah as a peripheral state, one that contributes to national development yet receives little in return. The LRA Sungai Limau dan LRA Bukit Selambau project becomes a symbol of marginalisation, enabling Sanusi to transform a technical issue into a public grievance, thus reinforcing his legitimacy as a protector of state rights. For me, this illustrates how infrastructure can be mobilised not only for developmental purposes but also as an emotional and political resource.

Furthermore, I observe that this strategy gains traction because it resonates with a broader sense of regional identity. When people hear that a crucial water project is delayed due to “federal bureaucracy,” they do not view it merely as a project management failure, they perceive it as structural abandonment. Sanusi’s role then shifts from being a state administrator to a symbol of resistance, defending the rights of his constituents against an unresponsive system. I regard this as a form of emotional mobilisation through infrastructure, where public frustration is channelled into a broader narrative of state pride and entitlement.

Yet I acknowledge that there is some validity to these criticisms. Federal bureaucracy in Malaysia does exhibit structural inefficiencies, particularly in approving and coordinating intergovernmental projects. But I also find that populist rhetoric tends to obscure the complexities of these administrative processes. In Sanusi’s discourse, there is little mention of inter-agency coordination challenges or internal governance issues that may have contributed to the delay. Here, I see how blame politics functions as a hegemonic strategy to assert moral superiority and reinforce political identity.

Ultimately, I argue that the LRA Sungai Limau dan LRA Bukit Selambau case is not merely about infrastructure delays, it is about the symbolic use of those delays within a broader political logic. Sanusi uses infrastructure not just to demonstrate administrative need, but to tell a story of injustice that can be emotionally shared by his constituents. In a federal system like Malaysia’s, where power and funding are unevenly distributed, I believe infrastructure will continue to serve as a battleground of symbolic politics until structural reforms are introduced to ensure equitable, transparent, and depoliticised development across state and federal lines.

### **Ecological Responsibility and the Ulu Muda Catchment Dilemma**

Environmental conservation is often framed as a matter of national responsibility and shared values. However, in the case of Ulu Muda, the vital forest catchment area in Kedah that feeds the Muda River. I observe that ecological responsibility has been unevenly distributed and strategically politicised. While Ulu Muda supplies raw water to more than four million people across Kedah, Penang, and Perlis, the cost of preserving the forest and its ecosystem is borne

almost entirely by the state of Kedah. In my view, this ecological asymmetry has become a critical element in Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor's political rhetoric, where environmental stewardship is reframed as a moral burden unfairly imposed on an underfunded upstream state (Abdullah, 2024; Miniandi et al., 2021; Malaysiakini, 2024).

Sanusi frequently highlights that Kedah is expected to act as the guardian of Ulu Muda while receiving little to no financial support from the downstream beneficiaries. I find that this narrative is not just environmental in nature, it is political. The conservation of Ulu Muda is positioned as a sacrifice that benefits others at Kedah's expense. In this narrative, environmentalism is not framed through global discourses of sustainability, but rather through a localised narrative of economic injustice. For Sanusi, protecting the forest is not merely an ecological imperative, it becomes a symbol of Kedah's moral high ground and its right to demand compensation. I interpret this as a form of resource moralisation, where environmental responsibility is converted into a political claim.

The dilemma, as I see it, lies in the absence of a formal mechanism that enables upstream states like Kedah to be compensated for preserving ecologically strategic landscapes. Malaysia lacks a structured Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) framework at the inter-state level, and while federal ministries such as the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment have occasionally allocated conservation funds, these are neither consistent nor adequate. Without formal PES structures, I observe that states like Kedah are placed in a difficult position: they must either absorb the cost of conservation or open the forest to logging to generate revenue. This structural gap is not just administrative, it is ecological, economic, and deeply political (Wunder, 2005).

What makes the case of Ulu Muda even more complex is the growing tension between ecological commitments and development needs. Kedah, as a less industrialised state, depends heavily on its natural resources for income (Rajoo et al., 2021). In multiple statements, Sanusi has warned that if no compensation is received, the state may consider logging in Ulu Muda to finance basic needs (Wan Mansor, 2020). For me, this threat is not merely rhetorical, it functions as a political instrument to pressure downstream states and the federal government. In such moments, ecological conservation is no longer seen as a universal good but as a negotiable asset. I believe this instrumentalisation of nature raises urgent questions about the ethics of sustainability in federal systems where financial and environmental responsibilities are structurally misaligned.

At the same time, I acknowledge that Sanusi's argument reveals a deeper truth about Malaysia's fragmented environmental governance. Without an enforceable inter-state agreement or ecological trust fund, each state is left to negotiate its own environmental interests within a competitive, zero-sum framework (Halmi & Rahman, 2021). In such a system, appeals to shared responsibility become secondary to political leverage. Ulu Muda is not merely a forest, it becomes a terrain of ecological negotiation, fiscal grievance, and identity politics.

In my view, the only viable path forward is the institutionalisation of inter-state ecological cooperation. The Ulu Muda case illustrates the need for a formal PES framework that ensures upstream states are fairly compensated for environmental services that benefit the nation as a whole. This could take the form of annual ecological transfers, co-managed conservation

zones, or an intergovernmental river basin authority. Without such mechanisms, I believe Malaysia will continue to reproduce environmental injustices that incentivise extraction over preservation and populist confrontation over collaborative governance (Wunder, 2005).

Ultimately, the Ulu Muda dilemma is not just about trees, rivers, or forest canopies. It is about how we assign value to environmental sacrifice, who bears the cost of sustainability, and how these burdens are narrated, resisted, or negotiated within a federation. Sanusi's use of Ulu Muda in his political discourse is a compelling reminder that ecological protection, in the absence of structural equity, can become both a source of legitimacy and a site of political contestation.

### **Comparative Reflections-Lessons from Global Transboundary Water Politics**

I believe that to fully understand the dynamics of water-related conflict between states, such as the case between Kedah and Penang we must move beyond national borders and engage with comparative global experiences. The Muda River case is not an isolated phenomenon. It shares structural features with many transboundary water conflicts around the world, where upstream states or countries leverage their geographic advantage to shape narratives, set demands, and, in some cases, exert political pressure on downstream entities. When I situate Kedah within these global parallels, I see that Sanusi's populist water discourse and hydro-political strategy are not merely localised reactions but part of a larger global pattern of resource contestation across uneven power structures.

One of the most illustrative comparisons is the Nile River conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt. Ethiopia, as the upstream country, constructed the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) as a strategic tool for national development, while Egypt, the downstream state heavily dependent on the Nile's flow, viewed the dam as an existential threat. As with Kedah, I find that Ethiopia's rhetoric centres on the "right to develop" and "sovereignty over natural resources," whereas Egypt relies on historical claims and colonial-era treaties to legitimise its position. The discursive framing by Sanusi that Kedah bears the cost of watershed protection while others reap the benefits mirrors the narrative structure of Ethiopia's appeal for justice, development rights, and recognition as an upstream power long denied economic equity (Wheeler et al., 2020).

Another relevant case is the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), where Lesotho, a small mountainous state rich in water, supplies water to South Africa through a formalised agreement. Although the arrangement generates revenue for Lesotho, studies show that its bargaining position is often weak due to asymmetries in political and economic power. I see a similar pattern in Kedah's position. Despite geographically controlling the Muda River and its key ecological zones, Kedah lacks the institutional leverage and federal backing to formalise its claims for compensation. In this context, I interpret Sanusi's populist rhetoric not merely as political manoeuvring but as a structural response to institutional underrepresentation where rhetorical confrontation becomes the only available tool for upstream actors within weak federal frameworks (Meissner & Turton, 2003).

Furthermore, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) provides a useful institutional model. Comprising multiple Southeast Asian nations, the MRC operates through a multilateral

framework of consensus, data-sharing, and sustained diplomacy. While imperfect, the MRC demonstrates how river governance can be formalised to promote cooperation over conflict. In contrast, Sanusi's unilateral demands highlight the vacuum of such a mechanism in Malaysia. Without a platform like MRC, upstream states such as Kedah are forced to make their claims publicly, and often confrontationally, because there is no institutional channel to negotiate water rights, ecological duties, or revenue-sharing in a structured and consistent manner (Jacobs, 2002).

What is most striking across these cases is the transformation of water from a shared natural flow into a symbolic boundary that structures political identity and economic hierarchy. In every case I studied, including Kedah, water becomes a site of narrative negotiation: who deserves it, who protects it, and who is marginalised by its absence. Sanusi's framing of Kedah as the overlooked guardian of the watershed who is morally entitled but politically excluded echoes this global pattern. I find that without robust institutional frameworks, upstream-downstream asymmetries often become politicised and moralised, rather than resolved through governance and law (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2018).

In conclusion, I believe the Muda River dispute offers Malaysia a timely opportunity to rethink its federal resource governance structure. Drawing from global cases, it becomes clear that Malaysia urgently needs an institutional mechanism such as a federal-state water council or independent arbitration body to adjudicate water rights, coordinate compensation, and uphold ecological stewardship. Without this, I fear that water will remain a medium for populist disputes rather than a foundation for sustainable and cooperative development.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined how water governance in Malaysia, particularly in the context of the Muda River and the leadership of Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor in Kedah, intersects with the broader dynamics of populist governance, ecological responsibility, and federal-state asymmetry. Through a detailed analysis of political rhetoric, legal structures, institutional deficiencies, and regional comparisons, I have argued that water in Kedah is no longer framed merely as a resource or technical issue it has become a powerful symbol of state identity, political leverage, and perceived injustice.

This article contributes a new conceptual and empirical lens to the study of environmental politics by revealing how water governance in Malaysia is increasingly entangled with populist political strategies at the subnational level. While existing literature on hydro-hegemony has largely focused on international river basins, this study demonstrates that the same dynamics of upstream control, discursive power, and infrastructure leverage operate within domestic federal systems particularly when legal ambiguities and resource asymmetries exist. Furthermore, this article extends the literature on populist governance by showing how environmental grievances specifically over water are not only tools of electoral mobilisation but also symbolic instruments to negotiate sovereignty and federal autonomy. By focusing on the case of Kedah under Sanusi's leadership, this study shifts the analytical focus from national populism to regional sub-state actors, thereby enriching our understanding of how ecological

responsibility, state identity, and political legitimacy are co-produced in federated, postcolonial states like Malaysia.

Sanusi's administration has transformed water discourse into a platform for asserting Kedah's upstream moral authority, constructing a narrative of sacrifice, and demanding recognition through compensation and policy autonomy. This approach aligns with the hydro-hegemony framework, where upstream actors exert influence not only through control of physical flows, but through discursive and institutional strategies that shape public perception and inter-state negotiations. At the same time, the use of populist governance techniques, framing Kedah as a loyal but neglected state, appealing to rural identity, and blaming bureaucratic inertia has proven effective in mobilising local support and challenging federal inertia.

One of the central findings of this study is the identification of a governance gap at the intersection of environmental stewardship and inter-state resource sharing. Kedah, despite bearing the ecological cost of protecting the Ulu Muda catchment, lacks a formal mechanism to claim compensation from downstream states such as Penang and Perlis. This absence of institutional infrastructure such as a Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) framework or an intergovernmental water commission creates a policy vacuum that fuels politicisation and symbolic confrontation. I argue that until such mechanisms are introduced, water disputes in Malaysia will continue to be governed not by law or mutual agreement, but by populist framing and reactive negotiation.

In a comparative perspective, the Muda River conflict resonates with global examples such as the Nile Basin, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, and the Mekong River Commission. These cases highlight the recurring pattern of upstream-downstream tensions in the absence of robust institutional frameworks. Malaysia, although operating within a federal system, has yet to fully institutionalise inter-state cooperation in environmental governance. I contend that the case of Kedah demonstrates the urgent need for legal and institutional innovation to manage shared natural resources equitably and sustainably.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the evolving literature on resource-based populism, demonstrating how natural resources particularly water can become politically mobilised symbols within federated governance systems. It also highlights how hydro-political asymmetries intersect with populist discourses to generate new forms of subnational resistance and identity-building. Methodologically, the study brings together legal analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative case study to offer a multidimensional view of water governance in Malaysia.

Policy-wise, the findings call for the establishment of an Inter-State Water Management Council under federal oversight, equipped with dispute resolution powers, fiscal tools for compensation, and mechanisms for ecological accountability. A binding PES framework should also be institutionalised to ensure upstream states are not penalised for undertaking conservation measures that benefit the nation as a whole.

For future research, I recommend three key directions. First, a quantitative assessment of water demand and ecological stress across Malaysian states is essential to inform more equitable and data-driven policy distribution. Second, a historical study on the evolution of federal-state

water relations since Merdeka would help trace patterns of centralisation, fragmentation, and contestation in water governance. Finally, a deeper exploration of public perception and media framing of water issues in Kedah is crucial to understand how populist narratives surrounding water are received, reinterpreted, and internalised by local communities.

In conclusion, water governance in Malaysia is not merely a question of pipes, pumps, or rainfall, it is a reflection of deeper structural imbalances, political identities, and governance failures. Sanusi's case in Kedah reveals how, in the absence of institutional clarity, water becomes a stage upon which power is contested, legitimacy is performed, and justice is demanded. Whether Malaysia responds with reform or remains trapped in episodic disputes will determine whether its waters remain a source of contention or evolve into a foundation for federal cohesion and environmental resilience.

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