

THE MARGINALISATION OF WATER POLITICS IN MALAYSIA'S POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the persistent sidelining of water in Malaysia's political discourse is not accidental mismanagement but a systemic project of depoliticisation that protects entrenched interests. Combining a critical reading of federal and state law and policy, longitudinal analysis of party manifestos and discourse analysis of political debates and mainstream media, it shows how a technocratic lexicon such as "capacity," "leakages," "NRW," and "mitigation works" strips water of rights-based claims and relocates it to the domain of engineering. The article extends the hydro-hegemony framework to the domestic arena, demonstrating how elite narrative control, concessionary regimes, and opaque bureaucracies reproduce postcolonial hierarchies while rendering affected communities data points rather than political subjects. It identifies "water populism" as a distinctive affective politics in which state elites mobilise territorial grievance, for example interstate river disputes, to deflect accountability without instituting structural reform. Failures of federalism, including legal ambiguities, fiscal asymmetries, and the absence of inter-state conflict resolution, compound these dynamics, while education, religion, and media normalise crisis and mute collective anger, amounting to sovereign neglect. The article contributes a normative and institutional agenda for hydro-democracy in Malaysia: recognising water as a political right, legislating a rights anchored National Water Act, mandating transparency over concessions and performance data, and institutionalising participatory governance across planning, tariff setting, and oversight. It concludes that without reclaiming water from technocracy and populism, Malaysia's democracy remains hollowed out at its most elemental threshold, namely the guarantee of dignified and equitable access to clean water.

Keywords: Water politics, Depoliticisation, Hydro democracy, Populism Federalism

INTRODUCTION

Water in Malaysia does not simply flow through rivers, pipes, and dams; it flows through the cracks of inequality, political failure, and national hypocrisy (Abdullah, 2025). In a country that claims to be independent and democratic, citizens still struggle to access clean water, while political elites manipulate perceptions, sell illusions of progress, and speak in Parliament without addressing water as a fundamental political crisis (Abdullah, 2025). This condition should not be seen as negligence but rather as a deliberate injustice, a calculated strategy of discursive erasure that renders water a non-issue in Malaysian politics. While slogans of

development, supremacy, and national unity dominate the political stage, water, the most essential source of life, is pushed aside and trivialised as a mere technical issue rather than a political right.

Who benefits from this silence? The answer is clear: those who have the power not to be held accountable. Technocratic elites, contractor-driven bureaucrats, and populist politicians turn water issues into fields of political capital, not spaces of public struggle. In Kelantan and Sabah, people have lived under water emergencies for more than two decades, yet water has never consistently penetrated the core manifestos of major political parties (Sakke, Jafar & Abidin, 2020; Mohd Makhtar, 2024; Aziz, 2025). Why? Because foregrounding water would mean exposing the structural weaknesses of Malaysia's postcolonial federalism, in which the Constitution (Article 74(2) and the Ninth Schedule) places water under state jurisdiction but allows the federal government to exercise indirect dominance through financial allocation, national policy direction, and regulatory frameworks such as the National Water Services Industry Act 2006. Hence, while states are constitutionally responsible for water management, their dependence on federal fiscal transfers and centralised decision-making mechanisms has blurred accountability lines. This entanglement produces a hybrid form of governance failure that is federal in design but local in manifestation. Thus, it is far more convenient to shift attention to issues of race, religion, or territorial identity, all of which are more easily manipulated to inflame electoral sentiment.

In this context, the water crisis is not merely a resource issue or an environmental concern; it reflects a deeper institutional failure within Malaysia's postcolonial statecraft. This failure does not imply a universal breakdown of water systems across all states, but rather exposes the uneven governance structures that allow chronic disparities in access and accountability to persist. A nation built on the legacy of colonialism continues to govern its resources through elitist, autocratic, and opaque approaches. National water policies, though present on paper, function more as bureaucratic cosmetics than genuine instruments of equity. In reality, water planning is dominated by a handful of unaccountable technocrats, particularly senior officials within the National Water Services Commission (SPAN), the Ministry of Environment and Water (KASA), and federal-linked corporations such as Pengurusan Aset Air Berhad (PAAB). These institutions, though technocratically framed as professional regulators or facilitators, often serve the interests of concessionaires, treatment plant contractors, and infrastructure conglomerates rather than public accountability (Chan, 2009; Ujang et al., 2022). When water is privatised, it is not merely a matter of transaction but a profound seizure of sovereignty whereby the people lose control over their own rights. The tragedy is that this seizure occurs with the tacit approval of political parties that claim to represent the "rakyat".

Moreover, Malaysian water governance discourse is frequently ensnared within a technocratic lexicon that depoliticises the subject. Official documents such as the Review of the National Water Resources Study (2000-2050) and Formulation of National Water Resources Policy: Final Report (2011) or the annual reports of the National Water Services Commission (SPAN) routinely frame water issues as questions of capacity, leakage, and infrastructural deficiency, rather than as manifestations of governance failure or inequities of rights. These documents leave no conceptual space for treating water as a site of political negotiation, nor for amplifying the claims of marginalised communities over sovereignty of water. Such silencing resonates with Ferguson's (1994) critique, where technocracy is shown to efface political dimensions of development projects and thereby reinforce existing hegemonies.

More insidiously, this injustice is concealed beneath a technocratic language that neutralises its political implications. Water is routinely framed in terms of leakage, infrastructure, and efficiency. There is no space in this discourse for questions of social justice, historical imbalance, or equitable governance. Within this narrative, those without access to clean water are reduced to data points, not political subjects. Here, the dominant discourse

manipulates reality: by declaring that water should not be politicised, power escapes moral and democratic responsibility. This is not mere omission. It is a form of symbolic violence, as theorised by Bourdieu, where suffering is normalised and people are conditioned not to resist (Abdullah, 2025).

Even more disturbing is how water only enters political discourse opportunistically and selectively. The dispute between Kedah and Penang, for instance, is mobilised through populist state narratives about territorial rights and resource theft, while structural reform and legal cooperation between states remain absent. Water is instrumentalised to stir emotions rather than to address systemic inequalities. In this setting, water populism in Malaysia is not born from grassroots mobilisation or popular resistance, but from elite manipulation designed to redirect anger away from the system itself (Abdullah et al., 2024; Abdullah, 2025). One major question remains scandalously underexplored: why is water not considered a basic political right? In a country that champions Maqasid Shariah, human dignity, and Islamic welfare, how is it that thousands of Muslim-majority communities continue to live without access to clean water? When national funds are spent on megaprojects and political spectacles, is water not considered public welfare? Or is this nation only committed to forms of welfare that symbolise prestige and electoral utility?

This refusal to politicise water reflects a deeper failure in Malaysian civic consciousness. In other regions such as Bolivia and South Africa, water has been a catalyst for democratic mobilisation and structural critique (Tyhotyholo & Ncube, 2023; Bobo, 2025). In Malaysia, the space remains empty. Civic education has failed to instil the awareness that water is a political right. Mainstream media continues to frame water issues as matters of logistics or sympathy, not politics or justice. As a result, people do not protest because they have been taught that water poverty is destiny, not betrayal (May & Daly, 2014). It will not obscure reality with statistics provided by ministries. Instead, it will name this abandonment for what it is: sovereign neglect, the state's failure to fulfil its most basic obligation of providing clean water to its people. It will trace how Malaysia's political discourse has actively and systematically silenced water through rhetorical strategies, media filters, and policy exclusion.

By exposing this abandonment, the article proposes a radical political reimagining: that water must be reclaimed from technocrats and returned to the people as a non-negotiable right. That Malaysian political discourse must cease treating water as a secondary concern after more sensational political topics. That water justice is political justice, and that democracy is hollow without access to clean water. If the current system cannot guarantee even the most basic of human needs, perhaps it is not the water policy that must change, but the system itself that must be confronted and transformed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in critical political analysis, drawing on the frameworks of postcolonial statecraft, hydro-hegemony (adapted to the domestic context), and Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence to interrogate how water is systematically silenced within Malaysia's political discourse. The data set encompasses party manifestos, Hansard debates from Parliament and selected State Assemblies (particularly during episodes of disruption or inter-state conflict), coverage in mainstream English- and Malay-language media, key policy and institutional documents, concessionaire reports where available, and relevant scholarly literature. Analysis is conducted through critical discourse analysis, involving the mapping of discursive frames (technocratic/engineering, economic/efficiency, rights/justice, populist/territorial, religious/moral), the identification of omissions and silences, and comparative contextualisation with international cases of hydro-democracy (such as Bolivia and South Africa). Inductive and deductive thematic coding (with categories including technocracy, populism, federal blame-shifting, sovereign neglect, and symbolic violence) is

employed with the aid of qualitative data management software. Validity is strengthened through triangulation of sources and transparent coding protocols, while reliability is reinforced by maintaining a systematic digital archive and audit trail. The principal limitations lie in restricted access to concession agreements and closed federal–state negotiations, as well as the absence of quantitative opinion surveys. Ethical considerations are addressed by relying solely on publicly available documents, ensuring that the research avoids issues of consent and confidentiality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on water politics in Southeast Asia has overwhelmingly concentrated on river basins marked by explicit transboundary conflicts, such as the Mekong, the Salween, and the Indus. By contrast, discussions of water politics in Malaysia remain marginal and fragmented, as if the country were insulated from hydro-political tensions or the structural inequalities of resource distribution. This omission not only reflects an epistemological failure to conceptualise water as a political arena but also reveals a historiographical and policy bias that systematically excludes infrastructure and distributional struggles from the domain of state power and political contestation.

Zeitoun and Warner's (2006) influential framework of hydro-hegemony opened the field to understanding water politics as a project of domination. They demonstrated how hegemonic states deploy not only material capabilities but also normative and institutional instruments to entrench their control over river flows. While this framework is typically applied to international contexts, this article contends that the logics of hydro-hegemony also operate domestically in Malaysia, through elite narrative control, technocratic structuring of water policy, and the systematic marginalisation of popular voices in decision-making. Unfortunately, much of the existing Malaysian scholarship on water, for instance Tan (2012) and Abdullah (2025), remains focused on ethnographic, socio-cultural, or urban–engineering challenges, without engaging with questions of power and structural conflict.

At the global level, works such as *Blue Gold* (Barlow & Clarke, 2017) and *Water Wars* (Shiva, 2016) have reframed water as a terrain of human rights struggles and social justice conflicts. These interventions highlight water not merely as an economic commodity but as an ideological battleground involving corporations, states, and communities. Yet, in Malaysia, no major body of scholarship has interrogated water as a structural political problem, particularly through postcolonial and federal lenses. Local research is either excessively technical (for example treatment plant design), overly micro (case studies of villages without piped supply), or normatively descriptive of state policies without questioning the architecture of their production.

Within Malaysian historiography, water scarcely exists as a legitimate subject of inquiry. Canonical texts such as *A History of Malaysia* (Andaya & Andaya, 2017), *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (Alatas, 2013) or *The Making of a Nation* (Cheah, 2002) neglect water entirely as a historical factor. This absence betrays an intellectual bias that relegates water to a “sub-political” status, unworthy of integration into the national historical narrative. While recent attempts by Abdullah and Mohd Noor (2020) have begun to reposition water as a subject within history, heritage, and politics, their contributions remain embryonic compared to global currents in critical water history, where scholars such as Worster (1992) and McNeill (2001) have exposed how water fundamentally shapes social structures, economies, and state conflict. The silence surrounding water in Malaysian historiography is thus not a mere methodological oversight but a deliberate silencing of structure within postcolonial academic discourse.

Similarly, studies on political populism in Malaysia, despite the rich analyses of Abdullah (2025), Chan (2009), Zawawi (2021) and Weiss (2020), rarely connect populist mobilisation to water. Populism scholarship tends to prioritise religion, ethnicity, and mega-

infrastructure (for example highways or mass transit systems) while neglecting how water, as a basic necessity, can also be instrumentalised as a populist tool, as seen in the Kedah–Penang conflict. This article argues that “water populism” constitutes a novel form of affective politics: one that not only obscures policy failures but also obstructs efforts to build more democratic water governance structures.

Finally, the inadequacy of existing literature lies in the absence of interdisciplinary approaches that bridge postcolonial theory, the sociology of power, and resource politics. Malaysia’s federal structure, colonial legacies, and complex concessionary water system demand an analysis that transcends municipal-level data to uncover the clashes between centre and periphery, between citizen and technocrat, and between political promises and betrayals. This article takes up that challenge by repositioning water not merely as a physical element but as a silenced field of power embedded in the architecture of Malaysia’s political system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Water as a Silenced Issue in National Political Rhetoric: Systemic Exclusion from Manifestos and Public Debate

In a state eager to present itself as “moderate,” “progressive,” and “resilient,” silence on the question of water constitutes a form of deliberate discursive violence. While slogans such as “*Negara Madani*,” and “*Reformasi*” resound during every election cycle, thousands of citizens continue to bathe in rivers, store rainwater in plastic drums, or rely on untreated natural sources (Ismail & Husin, 2024). Yet these realities are never deemed significant enough to feature in prime-time debates, Prime Ministerial policy addresses, or national political manifestos (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2018; 2019). Why?. Because politicising water entails exposing the failures of the state and, more alarmingly, opening a space for rights claims that threaten the authority of entrenched technocratic elites and the political class.

A longitudinal analysis of party manifestos from 1999 to 2022 reveals a disquieting void. Water is mentioned only as a technical issue: “increasing treatment plant capacity,” “reducing non-revenue water,” “improving distribution systems.” At no point has water been framed as a matter of distributive justice, citizens’ rights, or structural reform across federal and state boundaries (Abdullah, Hamil & Daud, 2018; Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2019; Boyman, S. N., & Jawan, J. A. 2022). In other words, water has been reduced to an engineering problem. It is no longer a site of struggle but a supposedly neutral domain requiring expertise, not the people’s voice. This reflects Ferguson’s (1994) critique of *the anti-politics machine*, whereby the language of development becomes a tool to strip projects of their political content and thereby protect existing hegemonies.

The exclusion of water from national political rhetoric is not mere intellectual neglect but a form of strategic silencing (Abdullah, 2025). Within the framework of postcolonial statecraft, water governance in Malaysia has never truly been entrusted to the people. Instead, control is concentrated in bureaucracies, private concessions, and state elites competing for federal funding. In this context, silence on water sustains the status quo: concessionary regimes remain unquestioned, privatisation advances without public scrutiny, and states such as Kelantan and Sabah continue to experience what may be termed “sovereign neglect” in the allocation of resources and policy attention (Lee, 2011; Lai, Chan & Roy, 2017).

Ironically, while the Malaysian state invests millions in academic debates on “water and climate change” or sends delegations to global water forums, many rural communities in Kelantan, Sabah, and parts of Sarawak still depend on unsafe and untreated water sources (National Water Services Commission (SPAN) Annual Report, 2022). At the same time, within Malaysia itself, studies have shown how in Selangor, communities such as the Orang Asli

displaced by the Sungai Selangor Dam were forced to adapt to contaminated forest run-off and diminished access to clean water (Nicholas, 2000), while deforestation has further degraded rivers vital to indigenous livelihoods (Al Jazeera, 2015). This disjuncture underscores the widening gap between global rhetoric and local realities, a gap perpetuated by the refusal to treat water as a political issue rooted in people's everyday needs. More troubling still is the parliamentary discourse. Analyses of governance highlight that parliamentary debates and state policies have tended to frame water in technical terms such as capacity, leakages, and tariffs while avoiding structural critiques of privatisation entrenched since the Mahathir era (Chan, 2009; Tan, 2012). Parliament, as the supposed apex of democracy, has thus failed to represent the disenfranchised in their struggle for access to water, especially marginalised groups such as the Orang Asli and rural communities. This reflects how water politics has been systemically constrained not only at the level of policymaking but also within the deliberative sphere of the nation.

Meanwhile, mainstream media such as The Star, New Straits Times (NST), and Berita Harian reinforce this silence through sensational yet non-structural narratives. Water disruptions are typically reported as "unexpected disasters" or "burst pipes," not as symptoms of systemic failure (Abdullah et al., 2002; 2002). No investigative journalism probes the signing of concessionary contracts, the control of state water companies, or the federal system's inability to produce equitable inter-state solutions. Within this discourse, suffering becomes routine. Water matters only in its absence, and when supply resumes, citizens are instructed to be grateful rather than to ask why they were left dry (Ithnin, Mokmin & Sakke, 2014). In Bourdieu's terms of symbolic violence, this silence is not passive (Burawoy, 2019). It is an instrument of power compelling citizens to accept crises as natural, not as betrayals. When villagers remark, "it is normal here, water is always lacking," this is not resignation but evidence of hegemony's success. Citizens have been disciplined not to question, not to demand, not to imagine water as a political right. The state has thereby succeeded in erasing the radical potential of water by rendering it routine and depoliticised (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2018).

Yet this neglect is not without consequence. Recurrent and intensifying water crises, such as those in Selangor, Kedah, Sabah and Kelantan (over decades), signal the collapse of the existing order. This article argues that water must be reclaimed from its technocratic framing. It is not merely a technical problem but a stage for power, a site of conflict, and a terrain of struggle. To allow water to remain absent from political discourse is to accept a democracy hollowed out into little more than electoral ritual. Water politics is not simply about pipes and dams; it is about who deserves to live with dignity and who is condemned to perpetual neglect. When the state remains silent on water, it is not for lack of time but because too much would be revealed were citizens to begin asking the right questions.

Technocracy as an Instrument of Depoliticisation: Engineering Discourse and the Erasure of Power

Behind every water crisis sensationalised by the media and experienced by ordinary citizens lies a far more deliberate project: the removal of political meaning from the question of water through technocratic language that appears neutral, scientific, and professional. This language is deployed to close off avenues of public questioning, to silence demands for structural reform, and to consolidate power in the hands of experts, contractors, and corporations. It is not merely rhetoric; it is a hegemonic mechanism that restructures the relationship between state, citizen, and the sources of life itself. Keywords such as non-revenue water (NRW), infrastructure ageing, optimum treatment capacity, or supply pressure deficit have become the first line of defence preventing citizens from comprehending the deeper realities of crisis. When the public asks "why is there no water?", the answers provided are "the treatment plant is not yet ready,"

“a pipe has burst,” or “mitigation works are in progress” (Abdullah et al., 2002; 2002). There are no answers to the more fundamental questions of who approved the concession, who profits in the long term, or why projects promised since the Eighth Malaysia Plan remain unfinished. These are all obscured behind a wall of technical terms that create distance between the real problems and the official narrative (Ujang et al., 2017; Sakke, Jafar & Abidin, 2020; Abdullah, 2025).

This is where the role of multinational corporations such as Ranhill SAJ in Johor, Air Selangor Sdn Bhd, Syarikat Air Darul Aman (SADA) and various state-owned enterprises operating as de facto private companies becomes clear. They deploy the legitimacy of technical expertise to maintain monopolies over production, distribution, and tariff setting. In this context, citizens are not the owners of water but its customers. Privatisation, ostensibly aimed at improving efficiency, has instead transformed water into a commodity and bureaucracy into the protector of corporate interests. When supply failures occur, responsibility is framed as an engineering challenge rather than a political failure or a violation of rights. In several cases, water companies are even shielded by legal provisions that protect them from prosecution by users, a form of institutional immunity that eliminates any scope for litigation against hegemonic actors (Lee, 2011; Tan, 2012, Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2018; Ranhill Utilities Berhad, 2022).

dly, this technocratic language functions selectively and is often deployed along lines of class and ethnicity. Rural districts with majority Malay or Bumiputera populations such as Kangar or Pendang are routinely described as “low-pressure areas” or “unsuitable for investment in modern treatment technology” (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2018; Abdullah & Zakarya, 2022). Within these terms lies embedded structural discrimination: poor and predominantly Malay communities are treated as unprofitable and of lower priority. Citizens in these areas not only suffer from a lack of water but also a lack of discursive resources to claim it politically. They are excluded from negotiation mechanisms, contract oversight, and access to real data. What they are given instead are ministerial press statements and the ritualised politics of “wait and see,” which has become part of a culture of resignation (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2019; Abdullah & Zakarya, 2022).

The irony is striking. A state that frequently invokes the principles of Maqasid Shariah and “rahmah” in governance does not place water at the centre of contemporary Islamic discourse. Friday sermons occasionally mention environmental stewardship and even water, but typically as moral exhortation rather than structural critique of governance and rights. While policy papers now link Maqasid to Islamic finance for water infrastructure, including sukuk programmes, this emphasis remains largely fiscal rather than a rights-based framing of access to clean water. Scholarship and guidance on water in Malaysia also skew toward fiqh classifications and technical treatment, reinforcing a technocratic lens over political accountability. Studies by Mohamad Akhir, Ismail and Mohd Yusof (2025) reflect this tendency, focusing on jurisprudential rulings and moral exhortations rather than institutional responsibility. Waqf-based proposals likewise foreground charitable provision rather than enforceable obligations of the state. There is still no systemic pressure from religious institutions to treat access to clean water as part of the state’s shariah responsibilities to secure the daruriyyat and maslahah of its citizens (Department of Islamic Affairs of Selangor, 2015; Hadhari UKM, 2018).

This critique must also extend to higher education. Many courses in water engineering, resource management, and urban planning teach students to view water as a technical problem without addressing its dimensions of rights, justice, and the colonial history of resource exploitation. Students are trained to use AutoCAD and SCADA, but not to analyse concessionary structures or the consequences of privatisation for the poor. In other words,

universities have become factories for technocrats who remain oblivious to the dynamics of power in resource governance (Mays, 2010).

This article therefore proposes that we resist the hegemony of technocratic language. We must empower alternative narratives that restore water as a legitimate political and civic domain, not merely for elite politicians but also for citizens, imams, teachers, students, and activists who have a stake in its governance. The call is not for the public to manage water systems technically but to reclaim their voice in how water is distributed, valued, and protected. Water must be recognised as a right, not a commodity, and the notion that only those in uniform or with engineering credentials can define its future must be rejected. If water continues to be packaged in technical terms that silence the people's voice, then what we are witnessing is not only a crisis of supply but also a crisis of democracy. Breaking the monopoly of this language is therefore not merely an academic task but a political and moral responsibility that can no longer be deferred.

State-Level Water Populism: The Manipulation of Water Politics as a Strategy of Sovereignty Claims

Behind the silence surrounding water in national discourse lies an emergent pattern that has become increasingly pronounced since 2018: the rise of water populism at the state level, particularly through narratives that frame water as an instrument of territorial sovereignty against federal authority. In this context, water is no longer entirely marginalised but is selectively manipulated by state elites as a strategy to bolster their legitimacy in the eyes of the people, not by addressing structural problems but by creating an external enemy allegedly obstructing the state's rights over natural resources (Abdullah, 2025).

The most visible example is the conflict between the Kedah state government and Penang over the Muda River. Sanusi instrumentalised water not merely as an administrative concern but as a symbolic and emotive political weapon. In his speeches, Sanusi asserted that Penang must pay for raw water from the Muda River and went as far as threatening to cut off its flow if the state refused. This rhetoric quickly captured media attention, despite the absence of legal grounds to substantiate the claim. What took place was not water governance but a form of affective mobilisation that reframed a structural crisis into a narrative of betrayal and marginalisation (Abdullah et al., 2024).

Such rhetoric is effective not because it is factually accurate but because it strikes at the level of emotion and identity. Water becomes a symbol of state dignity, and to demand water is equated with reclaiming rights long denied by the federal government (Saimy & Yusuf, 2013). Within the framework of postcolonial statecraft, this reflects the failure of the postcolonial state to distribute resources fairly and transparently. States such as Kedah and Kelantan, which during the 1970s to 1990s were comparatively marginalised in federal infrastructural planning and allocation, particularly under opposition-led administrations, have often invoked water as a metaphor for central neglect and distributive injustice (Abdullah, 2019; Aziz, 2025). Yet, at the same time, state administrations, particularly in Kedah, Kelantan, and Selangor, fail to introduce reforms in water management, do not present comprehensive long-term plans, and do not open participatory spaces for citizens in decision-making over resources (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2020; Mohd Makhtar, 2024; Aziz, 2025).

This reveals the paradox of water populism: water is invoked as a symbol to secure popular support but is never genuinely returned to the people. In many instances, the rhetoric of water sovereignty is most aggressively deployed in the run-up to state elections or when administrations face pressure over performance. State elites manufacture water crises as symbolic battlefields to cultivate an "us versus them" sentiment between "oppressed states" and a "tyrannical centre." Yet none of these demands result in structural reforms such as the

enactment of inter-state legislation, comprehensive river conservation plans, or mechanisms of joint negotiation. Instead, populist rhetoric produces two forms of damage: first, it keeps citizens trapped in a state of emotion without substantive action; second, it undermines opportunities for inter-state cooperation and erodes trust between federal and state governments. Water populism not only fails to resolve the real issues but postpones action and diverts attention from the necessity of structural solutions. In other words, water is not constructed as a site of welfare and justice but as a terrain for manufacturing enemies and deflecting self-failure (Khaneiki, Schmidt & Al-Ghafri, 2024).

Even more troubling is the insertion of religious and ethnic undertones into this narrative to deepen support. In the case of the Muda River, the rhetoric was framed in such a way as to imply that water belonged exclusively to a region (Abdullah, 2024). This is deeply dangerous as it casts natural resources as exclusive possessions rather than collective trusts. Within such a logic, water becomes an instrument of ethno-political mobilisation rather than a shared source of life. In traditions of states that have embraced hydro-democracy, such as Bolivia where popular movements successfully halted water privatisation in Cochabamba, water was articulated as a collective issue that cut across class, ethnicity, and region (Bobo, 2025). In Malaysia, however, water has been turned into a selective issue monopolised by state elites and never opened to grassroots democratic deliberation. There are no people's forums to debate state water governance, no transparency in treatment plant contracts, and no mechanisms of citizen review over concessions or tariff setting.

This article argues that water populism in Malaysia is not a people's liberation movement against central hegemony but an affective manipulation by state elites to preserve power. It is an emotional strategy that conceals the absence of substantive policy. In this sense, water becomes loud in political podiums but mute in policy-making rooms. To liberate water from the grip of populism, governance must be restructured to be not only inter-state and transparent but also participatory and just.

From Crisis to Compliance: Political Education and the Normalisation of Public Silence

Among the most painful yet rarely asked questions in the context of Malaysia's water crisis is: why are citizens not angry? Why do communities forced to collect rainwater or wait for water lorries every week and not build strong grassroots movements, sustain public pressure, or elevate water to the centre of their electoral agenda? For us, the answer is not that people are resigned or ignorant. It lies in the construction of a culture of acquiescence through a weak system of political education, reinforced by a hegemonic state structure that has succeeded in normalising suffering as part of life's destiny rather than as evidence of state failure.

In Malaysia, civic education has never developed an awareness of water as a civic and constitutional right. Schools teach children about the water cycle, the importance of avoiding waste, and environmental stewardship via modules like "Water Education & Awareness" (UTM, 2012), but never that access to water is a public entitlement that the state is obliged to guarantee. In Civic & Citizenship Education (CCE), as Mahmood (2014) shows, the emphasis lies on moral values, patriotism, and respect for authority, but not on civic accountability or citizens' entitlement to question policies on water concessions or resource allocation. This omission is not merely a curricular gap but an ideological choice that produces generations who understand the importance of water but not their civic right to claim it.

Even more damaging is how media, religion, and bureaucratic structures reinforce the normalisation of crisis. When water disruptions occur, media reports emphasise calming narratives such as "the government is acting," "technical issues will be repaired," and "phase two mitigation works will commence." No space is provided for articulating collective anger, let alone questioning structural policy. Media rarely broadcast the voices of the poor forced to

ration water daily; instead, they focus on ministerial press conferences or visuals of new treatment plants (Abdullah et al., 2022). In such an environment, suffering is not transformed into rage but reduced to statistics. Empirical evidence from *Environmental Journalism: Investigating the coverage of water disruption in mainstream English online news* (2025) shows that media framing in Malaysia prefers technical fix language over blame or structural critique. Similarly, analysis of *Malaysia's Sabah water crisis: don't blame the weather ...* (2024) reveals how media commentary deflects responsibility to natural causes rather than governance failures. The Singapore–Malaysia water relationship study (Tortajada & Pobre, 2011) also shows that media tends to give voice to state actors rather than the everyday experiences of communities who suffer disruptions.

Furthermore, Malaysia's party system does not provide consistent channels to advance water rights in a progressive manner. Legislators are more inclined to resolve water issues through clientelist practices, such as delivering water lorries, distributing tanks, or relaying complaints to departments (Ujang et al., 2022). They do not interrogate privatisation policies, long-term concession contracts, or unequal development allocations. In many cases, water becomes campaign rhetoric rather than an agenda for structural reform. As a result, citizens are not trained to see water as a site of collective political struggle but as the business of "YBs" (an abbreviation of Yang Berhormat, meaning "The Honourable," a common Malay title for elected representatives) or insiders. This pattern has been particularly evident under leaders such as Sanusi whose populist approach has frequently instrumentalised water issues for political legitimacy. Studies by Abdullah (2025) show how political parties favour short-term visible acts over long-term justice in water governance. The recent case study under the Sanusi administration (Abdullah, 2025) illustrates how interstate water disputes are used symbolically rather than resolved structurally. Electoral shifts observed underline that water failures can change votes, but not always policies. This is not because people are lazy or foolish but because the entire system of education, media, and politics has been structured to extinguish the will to struggle over water. Suffering has been normalised and the state has succeeded in erasing water from the political agenda of the people.

This situation stands in sharp contrast to countries with traditions of water protest. In Bolivia, the Cochabamba Water War became an international symbol of hydro-resistance, vividly recounted by Olivera & Lewis (2004). In South Africa, the constitutional recognition of the right to water under Section 27(1)(b) was accompanied by mobilisation from the poor demanding access to clean water as part of democratic justice, a struggle critically analysed by Mbana & Sinthumule (2024). In Malaysia, no grassroots movement has genuinely elevated water into a site of structural change. This article therefore argues that it is not the people who have failed but the system that has prevented them from building critical consciousness of their rights. To liberate water from its technocratic enclosure and the pacifying grip of religion, radical political education must be rebuilt from schools, media, and mosques to parliament. Citizens must be taught that when they lack access to clean water, it is not simply a "test" but a betrayal of governance. They must be convinced that anger over water is not a sin but a moral responsibility. And they must be given spaces to question, challenge, and demand, because only through awakened anger can normalised suffering be transformed into a liberating political movement.

Water Federalism in Crisis: Structural Power Imbalances between Centre and State

Malaysia as a federal state often promotes its governance structure as a symbol of territorial justice and a harmonious division of powers between federal and state. Yet in the domain of water management this rhetoric of federalism is revealed to be an illusion that conceals asymmetries of power, blurred lines of responsibility, and systemic structural failures. Here we

see how water federalism in Malaysia is not a mechanism of equitable governance but rather a contested terrain marked by opacity, legal disputes, and political neglect (Persekutuan, 2006).

Constitutionally, water falls within state jurisdiction, yet at the same time the federal government through the National Water Services Commission (SPAN) and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability is responsible for formulating national water policy. Fiscal allocations are drawn almost entirely from the federal centre, including the financing of treatment plants, infrastructure maintenance, and emergency aid during crises. This imbalance generates a confusing situation: states hold nominal authority over water but lack the fiscal and technical capacity to administer it meaningfully without federal intervention. It produces a sovereignty gap that not only obstructs sustainable resource development but also creates space for political manipulation (Ujang et al., 2012).

The conflict between Kedah and Penang over the Muda River illustrates directly the defects of this federal water structure. Kedah, as the upstream state, demanded payment from Penang for using river water originating within its territory, despite the absence of a legal framework enabling such claims to be enforced. Penang insisted that water is a common resource that cannot be commodified by the upstream state. In this dispute, the federal government did not act as a neutral facilitator capable of forging consensus and cooperation, but rather allowed the conflict to fester under the pretext of “state powers.” This is the real failure: when crises arise, there is no authoritative federal body able to resolve water conflicts fairly and decisively (Abdullah et al., 2024).

In Sabah and Sarawak, the special provisions of the Malaysia Agreement 1963 add further complexity. Sabah retains its own water management statutes (Sabah Water Resources Enactment, 1998) and when crises occur, such as at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), the issue rapidly escalates into a centre–periphery dispute marked by mutual blame. In the UMS case, the campus says it suffers because it is not prioritised when water levels drop, while the state blames distribution infrastructure and internal pumping issues (The Star, 2025). In all these cases it is citizens who suffer. The federal system, ostensibly designed to be just, has become a stage for reciprocal blame. States accuse the federal government of withholding funds and expertise, while the federal government blames the states for refusing to relinquish powers or participate in national restructuring initiatives (Abdullah, 2025). Policy decisions are tossed between political rhetoric and the absence of coordination. More worryingly, these centre–state conflicts open the door to populist exploitation, as state elites manipulate water issues as evidence of federal oppression even while failing to enact transparent and progressive water policies at their own level.

This ambiguity is reinforced by legal weaknesses. There is no national act that clearly regulates inter-state water management. No formal conflict-resolution mechanism exists for disputes over shared resources. The Auditor General’s Report, as reported by Bernama (2024), highlighted that poor coordination between federal and state agencies contributed to delays in the implementation of rural water supply projects in Sabah and Sarawak, with no substantial institutional reforms to address these recurring weaknesses. These weaknesses are not simply bureaucratic but reflect the structural failure of water federalism itself. This critique raises a deeper question: is Malaysia’s federal system capable of ensuring distributive justice in water for all its citizens, or is it merely a political instrument that perpetuates imbalance? If water, the most basic resource of life, cannot be managed equitably through federal arrangements, then what is the meaning of federalism itself? Where lies the moral and political responsibility of a federal government when citizens in certain states endure decades of deprivation and neglect simply because they fall outside the political radar of the centre?

This article argues that Malaysia’s model of water federalism, despite periodic federal allocations to the states, remains an ineffective governance structure for ensuring equitable justice and long-term sustainability. Instead, it functions as a legal fiction that masks power

struggles, fiscal leakages, and a vacuum of accountability. Reform is required not only in policy and law but also in the very philosophy of centre–federal relations. Water must be recognised as a national issue that transcends state boundaries, partisan lines, and ideological divides. Without this, Malaysia will not only continue to face recurring water crises but will also witness the erosion of the very meaning of federalism itself.

Reclaiming Water as Radical Politics: Hydro-Democracy and the Struggle for Power Reform

For too long, water has been systematically positioned as a technical issue, an administrative domain, or a developmental challenge, and only rarely framed as a radical political question. Yet, as argued in the preceding subtopics, the challenges of water management in Malaysia extend beyond administrative shortcomings and reflect deeper structural and institutional deficiencies within the governance framework. They are manifestations of structural domination, class inequality, and systemic neglect that require a radical political approach, namely a rethinking of who holds power over water, who has the right to claim it, and how the existing structures must be resisted and transformed. It is in this context that the need for a new discourse arises: hydro-democracy, a form of democracy built upon the just and participatory governance of water resources (Barlow & Clarke, 2017).

Hydro-democracy does not simply mean universal access to clean water. It means that water governance must be returned to the people through a system that guarantees accountability, transparency, and direct participation in every stage of decision-making. In the current system, decisions about dam construction, plant privatisation, concession agreements, and tariff setting are made without the involvement of the wider public. Even critical data such as dam levels, river pollution rates, or the performance of water companies are concealed behind corporate secrecy and technical jargon. Citizens are rendered passive objects, waiting, complaining, and expressing gratitude only when the taps flow again (Kliot, 2005).

Within the framework of hydro-democracy, citizens are no longer merely consumers but water citizens. They must possess the right to full information, the right to participate in public consultations before any water project is undertaken, and the right to scrutinise and challenge privatisation contracts that undermine the public interest. This requires not minor adjustments but total structural transformation. Water governance must no longer be dominated by political elites, technocrats, and corporations, but guided by the principles of social justice and long-term sustainability. This demand necessarily extends to legal reform. Malaysia still lacks a comprehensive and progressive National Water Act that enshrines citizens' rights to water. Current regulations are fragmented between state powers, SPAN, and environmental law. From the perspective of hydro-democracy, there must be a new legal framework that establishes water as a human right rather than a commodity (Ujang et al., 2022).

Beyond law and policy, hydro-democracy requires a transformation in political culture. Citizens must be trained to understand that anger over water crises is a form of political consciousness, not merely a consumer grievance. Civic education, religious sermons, media coverage, and university curricula must be reshaped to reconstruct water as a site of collective struggle, not simply one of science and management. What is needed is a shift from apolitical compliance to critical engagement. Only then can water be reclaimed from the hegemonic structures that have monopolised decision-making and silenced dissent. This article argues that the failure to build hydro-democracy in Malaysia is in fact a failure of democracy itself. If the state cannot guarantee equitable access to clean water, then all rhetoric about compassion, prosperity, and social justice is hollow. Such language becomes promises without content, symbols without meaning. Water is not only about pipes and pressure; it is about who has the right to live with dignity and who is left behind in poverty and pollution.

Most importantly, the demand for hydro-democracy must not stop at the level of policy. It must take root as a grassroots movement reclaiming power for the people. It must reject the technocratic narrative that strips away emotion and dignity. It must reject the false populism of state elites who use water as propaganda without structural reform. And it must reject the hollow federalism that creates divisions rather than bridges of justice. Hydro-democracy is a challenge to all: to the technocrats who sit comfortably in offices, to the politicians who exploit water as campaign fodder, and to the citizens themselves who have long been conditioned into submission to an unjust system. This call is not mere rhetoric. It is a summons to rebuild the nation from its most basic foundation: just water, democratic water, liberating water.

EPILOGUE

The water crisis in Malaysia is not merely a logistical failure or a technical mishap. It reflects the deeper structural fractures within the postcolonial state, a state that continues to struggle in constructing an equitable system of resource governance, in reconceptualising power as a public trust, and in recognising water as a foundation of social justice. This article argues that the marginalisation of water in Malaysia's political discourse is not a bureaucratic accident or an administrative weakness but a systemic project built on exclusion, filtration, and subjugation. Through a holistic analysis, it becomes clear that water has been depoliticised by technocratic language that erases conflict, silenced within national rhetoric, manipulated by state-level populism, and normalised through education, religion, and media. At the same time, water provides the clearest lens through which to observe how class inequality, the distortions of federalism, and the neglect of basic rights are perpetuated within the legal and policy frameworks of the state. The suffering caused by water scarcity is not a sign of underdevelopment but rather evidence of a system designed to mute the voices of the marginalised while consolidating power in the hands of the few.

This critique must be understood within a broader framework: water is not an isolated issue but a lens through which to expose the authoritarian and elitist logics of resource management in postcolonial states such as Malaysia. Like land, education, and healthcare, water reveals how state power is exercised, whether inclusively and comprehensively, or selectively and oppressively. In the Malaysian case, the answer is increasingly clear: water has been governed not as a right but as an instrument of control, profit, and manipulation. This article also challenges the myth of development propagated by governments and experts alike. The rhetoric of progress, civility, and administrative efficiency is meaningless if hundreds of thousands of citizens still live without access to clean water, if rivers continue to be polluted in the name of development, and if policy decisions are made without public consultation. Water is the true test of reform, and the failure to manage it equitably demonstrates that reform is little more than a cosmetic exercise of power designed to obscure reality.

It is here that the introduction of a hydro-democracy framework becomes critical. This radical project calls for water governance to be returned to the people, for technocratic discourse to be subjected to democratic oversight, and for the voices of the oppressed to be placed at the centre of resource debates. Without such steps, Malaysia risks reproducing the cycle of neglect, populism, and inter-state conflict *ad infinitum*. Worse still, it will bequeath to future generations not only broken infrastructure but also a political culture that is silent, resigned, and incapable of resistance. Ultimately, this article insists that water must no longer be treated as a peripheral concern. It is the lifeblood of the nation, a terrain of struggle, and a symbol of justice. If Malaysia is truly to become a fair, progressive, and dignified state, then water must occupy the forefront of the agenda, not only in policy but also in collective consciousness, public education, and political imagination. Only when citizens have the courage to declare that the absence of water is not simply a matter of pipes but a betrayal of the system itself will the first steps toward a liberatory state truly begin.

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