

Politics and Governance in an Urban New Village: The Case of Serdang, Selangor

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To cite this article: Jau-Mei Cheng and Kee-Chye Ho (2025). Politics and Governance in an Urban New Village: The Case of Serdang, Selangor. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 14(1): 1–24. [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14\(1\).0001](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14(1).0001)

To link to this article: [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14\(1\).0001](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14(1).0001)

Abstract

This article illustrates broader governance issues in an urban “New Villages” in Malaysia by examining the political, governance, and developmental challenges of Serdang New Village. The study situates Serdang within its contemporary urban context and turns to its historical political evolution—tracing party preferences, voting patterns, and political alignments—as a means to understand current governance conditions. It then investigates the governance structures within the Greater Serdang region, identifying key institutional, administrative, and developmental challenges specific to the New Village, including fragmented authority and weak public participation mechanisms. The article argues for targeted reforms such as village committee revitalisation and the adoption of a bidirectional governance model that bridges top-down government control with bottom-up community engagement, rather than a restoration of local elections. The study intends to draw insights into the complexities of governing urban New Villages within Malaysia’s centralised political system and outlines pathways for more responsive and inclusive local governance.

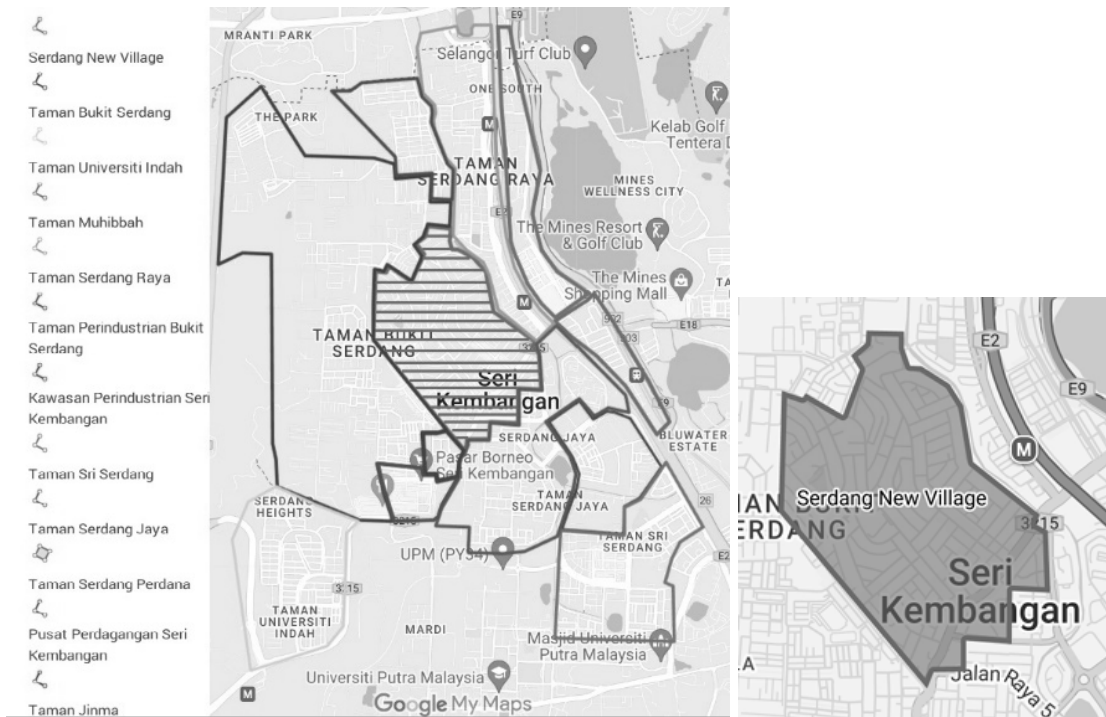
Keywords: Serdang New Village, governance, political dynamics, urban development

Introduction

Serdang New Village, now known as Kampung Baru Seri Kembangan, is one of the more than several hundred resettlement villages in Malaysia. These villages were created in 1949 in response to the postwar struggle against British colonial rule in an attempt to re-locate “squatters” in rural areas into compact settlements situated on the outskirts of towns. Serdang New Village is one of the 42 in Selangor and one of several large villages on the fringe of Kuala Lumpur. It is now surrounded by new urban development. It is strategically situated between Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya and has consequently been transformed into a thriving urban place. This case study of Serdang New Village will explore the political and governance dynamics in the context of an urbanised New Village. Unlike previous studies which were largely concerned with the history, diverse social issues, local government and related issues of New Villages, the focus here is to address the hitherto neglected aspects of governance challenges facing New Villages that have been or are being integrated into adjoining urban centres.¹

Several factors underpin the significance of this case. First, Serdang exemplifies an intermediate space between rural setting and urban integration. As such, it serves as a microcosm of both the traditional issues faced by New Villages and the newer pressures brought about by urbanisation. Second, it is a New Village facing increased economic diversification, rising population density, and intensified infrastructure demands—conditions that often necessitate more complex governance responses and public engagement. Studying Serdang thus allows for closer observation of how these forces interact with the local administrative framework. Third, Serdang’s development trajectory closely aligns with national urbanisation policies, especially since the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the 1970s. Its proximity to major urban centres makes it a key point in understanding how national policies impact local governance. Finally, urban New Villages challenge conventional definitions of “New Villages,” which are often associated with rurality. By analysing Serdang, this study contributes to a broader conceptual understanding of New Villages in contemporary Malaysia, particularly under conditions of rapid urban transformation.

This study embraces three administrative and geographical spaces. “Serdang” refers to the New Village alone, but in the broad sense it encompasses also the surrounding areas that have undergone recent development. The name is now part of the collective memory of the local community. “Greater Serdang” implies this broad sense of Serdang and adjacent area’s urban sprawl and transformative changes. Recent developments have given rise to largely housing centres such as Taman Bukit Serdang, Taman Serdang Raya, Taman Universiti Indah, and others. The third geographical concept is “Seri Kembangan” which is a broader region that encompasses not only the Greater Serdang region and Serdang New Village but also extends to include surrounding housing developments such as Puncak Jalil, Taman Equine, Bandar Putra Permai, and others, which are all adjacent to the Greater Serdang region.

Figure 1*Greater Serdang and Serdang*

Based on Google My Maps and MyGeoportal

New Villages have been categorised into three types in a village study. Type A New Villages are those situated at the outskirts of urban areas; Type B New Villages are found around semi-urban areas; and Type C New Villages are located in rural areas (MCA New Village Affairs Bureau, 1999). Serdang is considered a Type A New Village, with urban industry and commerce dominating its economic activities. Its strategic location has enabled it undergo rapid development in the State. It has a total area of 834 hectares and a population of around 20,000, approximately 98% of whom are Chinese (Guo, 2012; Ma & Fan, 2020).² According to Lim and Soong (2002), Serdang New Village is an example of an urban New Village that has transitioned from an agricultural-based community to one centred around industry and commerce.

Historical and Political Context of Serdang

To understand present-day governance dynamics in Serdang New Village, it is essential to first

examine the village's historical political context. The legacies of past political arrangements, state-community relations, and administrative structures continue to influence contemporary governance and civic engagement; First, it needs to take into account Serdang's historical background prior to the creation of Serdang Baru New Village in order to comprehend the whole political landscape. In the 1940s, two significant political trends emerged after World War II, influencing the past Greater Serdang region. The Malayan Emergency marked the confrontation between British colonial authorities and communist forces, while the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 prompted some left-leaning youths to return to China, reflecting the interplay of politics, identity, and migration during this period (Looi, 2021).

The first local council election in 1953 highlighted Serdang's left-wing influence, with the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Labour Party of Malaya (LPM) each winning six seats (*The Straits Times*, 1953a & 1953b). Although the MCA initially had strong ties to the British government and local elites, the LPM gained traction among the middle and lower classes, advocating for social reform. The MCA, primarily composed of elite Chinese members and heavily supported by business magnates and the influential upper class, seen to be distanced from the middle and lower-class villagers, particularly in the context of local elections. Subsequently, when the LPM later withdrew from local council elections in Serdang Baru, the MCA managed to secure seats without any formidable competitor. However, by 1959, the Malaysian People's Party (MPP) replaced the MCA as the dominant political force in Serdang, reflecting the continued influence of left-wing tendencies.

During the 1950s, communist influence persisted in Serdang. In 1956, a Malayan Communist Party (MCP) camp was discovered near the village, raising suspicions that locals were aiding communists (*Sin Chew Daily*, 1956, Jun 19). This prompted an anti-communist procession in June 1956, modelled after one in Banting, to declare opposition to communism and to transform Serdang into a "white zone." The procession, involving half the villagers, was seen by British authorities as evidence of disassociation from the MCP. Subsequently, arrests and actions against communists in Serdang escalated following the 1956 march, including 32 individuals from Serdang in October 1958 (*Sin Chew Daily*, 1958, Oct 25). By the early 1960s, MCP activities in Serdang were dismantled, and the village was officially declared free from communist threats as the Malayan Emergency ended in 1960.

The Federation of Malaya gained independence in 1957 and the first general election was held in 1959. Since then, 14 general elections have taken place between 1959 and 2018. Local council elections were conducted up to their abolition in 1965.

In the first local council election in Serdang in 1953, the LPM and the MCA each secured six seats. Data from the 1962 General Election for the Local Council reveal that the Local Council of Serdang Baru was divided into 12 Election Areas, with each representing one seat. The election

results are for the local council of Serdang Baru show that the Socialist Front (SF), representing then new left-wing forces in Malaya, won nine seats with large majorities, while the Alliance government won only three seats. According to Dato' Yap Pian Hon, who served as the secretary of the Serdang local council in the 1960s, local council elections were conducted whenever the three-year term of any council member expired. As the federal and state government structures, the party securing the majority of seats would be designated as the “ruling party.”³

Table 1

Results of 1962 Local Council Election of Serdang Baru

Area	Party	Votes	Elected
1	Alliance	139	√
	Socialist Front	115	
2	Socialist Front	163	√
	Alliance	90	
3	Alliance	146	√
	Socialist Front	110	
4	Socialist Front	91	√
	Alliance	49	
5	Socialist Front	207	√
	Alliance	83	
6	Socialist Front	159	√
	Alliance	90	
7	Socialist Front	189	√
	Alliance	81	
8	Socialist Front	163	√
	Alliance	83	
9	Socialist Front	160	√
	Alliance	100	
10	Alliance	83	√
	Socialist Front	58	
11	Socialist Front	160	√
	Alliance	62	
12	Socialist Front	122	√
	Alliance	43	

Source: Adapted from *Pilihan2 Raya Majlis Tempatan 1962 Keputusan2 & Perangkaan Perundian* [Local Council Elections 1962 Results & Voting Statistics], by Election Commission of Malaya, 1963, (p.161-163).

An examination of the voting pattern and outcome in the federal and state elections would reveal the political landscape and its evolution in Seri Kembangan. Serdang was included in the Damansara constituency in 1959, but was placed in Petaling in 1974 and in Puchong in 1986. It became federal constituency of Serdang in 1995. In 2018, it became part of the Puchong constituency again. Serdang remained as a state constituency from 1959 and took the name of Seri Kembangan in 1995. Table 2 shows the electoral results of federal and state constituencies of Serdang and Seri Kembangan between 1959 and 2023.

Table 2

Election Results of the Federal and State Constituencies in Serdang/Seri Kembangan, 1959–2023

Elections	Federal	Winning Party	Opponent	Elections	State	Winning Party	Opponent
1959	Damansara	MPP	MCA	1959	Serdang	MPP	MPP
1964		MCA	LPM	1964		MPP	MPP
1969		DAP	MCA	1968*		MCA	MCA
1974	Petaling	DAP	GERAKAN	1969		DAP	DAP
1978		DAP	MCA	1974		MCA	MCA
1982		MCA	DAP	1978		DAP	DAP
1986	Puchong	DAP	MCA	1982		MCA	MCA
1990		DAP	MCA	1986		MCA	MCA
1995	Serdang	MCA	DAP	1990	Seri Kembangan	MCA	MCA
1999		MCA	DAP	1995		MCA	MCA
2004		MCA	DAP	1999		MCA	MCA
2008		DAP	MCA	2004		MCA	MCA
2013		DAP	MCA	2008		DAP	DAP
2018	Puchong	DAP	GERAKAN	2013		DAP	DAP
2022		DAP	KIMMA	2018		DAP	DAP
				2023		DAP	DAP

* By-election

Source: Compiled by the author

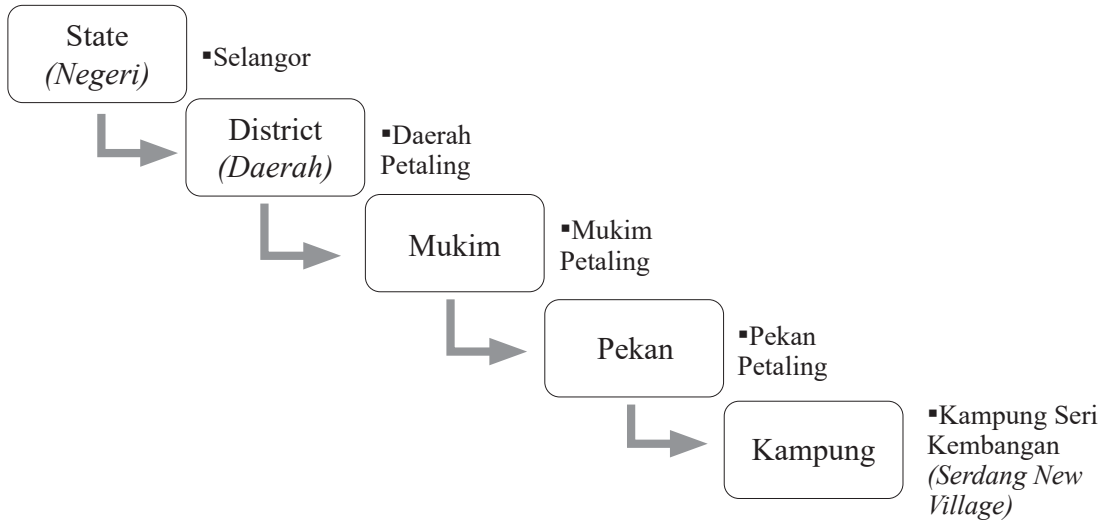
From the Federal election results, it is clear that the DAP was victorious on 8 occasions, the MCA 5 and MPP twice. At the State level, the performance of DAP and MCA was practically reversed, with MCA winning 8 times, DAP 6 times and MPP twice.

The analysis of data presented above reveals that due to the influence of left-wing ideologies in the 1940s and 1950s, the early victors in the Serdang region were predominantly left-wing political parties (Table 2). For instance, in the first Malayan general election in 1959, the Alliance (the precursor to the Barisan Nasional) achieved a resounding victory, securing 73 out of a total of 104 parliamentary seats and an overwhelming 23 out of 28 seats in the Selangor State Legislative Assembly. However, in the Serdang region, both federal and state constituencies were won by the left-wing Socialist Front, a political alliance involving MPP and LPM, thereby marking the inception of Serdang as a stronghold for opposition parties. Subsequent to the May 13 Incident in 1969, the formation of the Barisan Nasional (BN) rendered the ruling party unprecedentedly strong and stable.⁴ Nevertheless, the influence of the opposition party, DAP, in Serdang did not significantly diminish, and subsequent federal and state elections in Serdang primarily evolved into contests between MCA and DAP. From 1959 to 2023, DAP won the relevant federal elections on nine occasions compared with five for MCA. Conversely, in state elections, the situation was precisely the opposite, with MCA securing victory in Serdang state constituency elections eight times, compared to DAP's six victories. The situation of non-synchronised outcomes between federal and state elections occurred on three separate occasions: 1974, 1986, and 1990. In all these instances, MCA triumphed in state seats, while DAP secured parliamentary seats. This suggests a voting pattern in which voters sought to balance power by voting for the opposition at the federal level while endorsing the ruling party at the state level in the hope of securing government resources for local development. In summary, from the 1970s to the 1990s, both parties experienced victories and losses in Serdang/Seri Kembangan's federal and state constituencies. After 1995, the phenomenon of non-synchronised federal and state outcomes no longer occurred. MCA was the dominant political force in the Serdang region between 1995 and 2004, but since then, DAP has been the dominant political force in the Serdang region.

This historical political trajectory—marked by left-wing dominance, periods of political volatility, and strategic voting behaviour—has left a lasting legacy on local political culture in Serdang. These dynamics continue to inform the ways in which residents engage with governance structures, how state actors perceive and approach the community, and how bottom-up and top-down governance models, which will be introduced and discussed in the next sections, intersect in the New Village today.

Governance Framework in Serdang

The government framework of the Greater Serdang region and Serdang or Seri Kembangan New Village is influenced by the administrative structure of the State. This is largely based on the hierarchy of regional division by which different levels of administration is carried out (Figure 3).

Figure 3*Administrative Divisions of Selangor State*

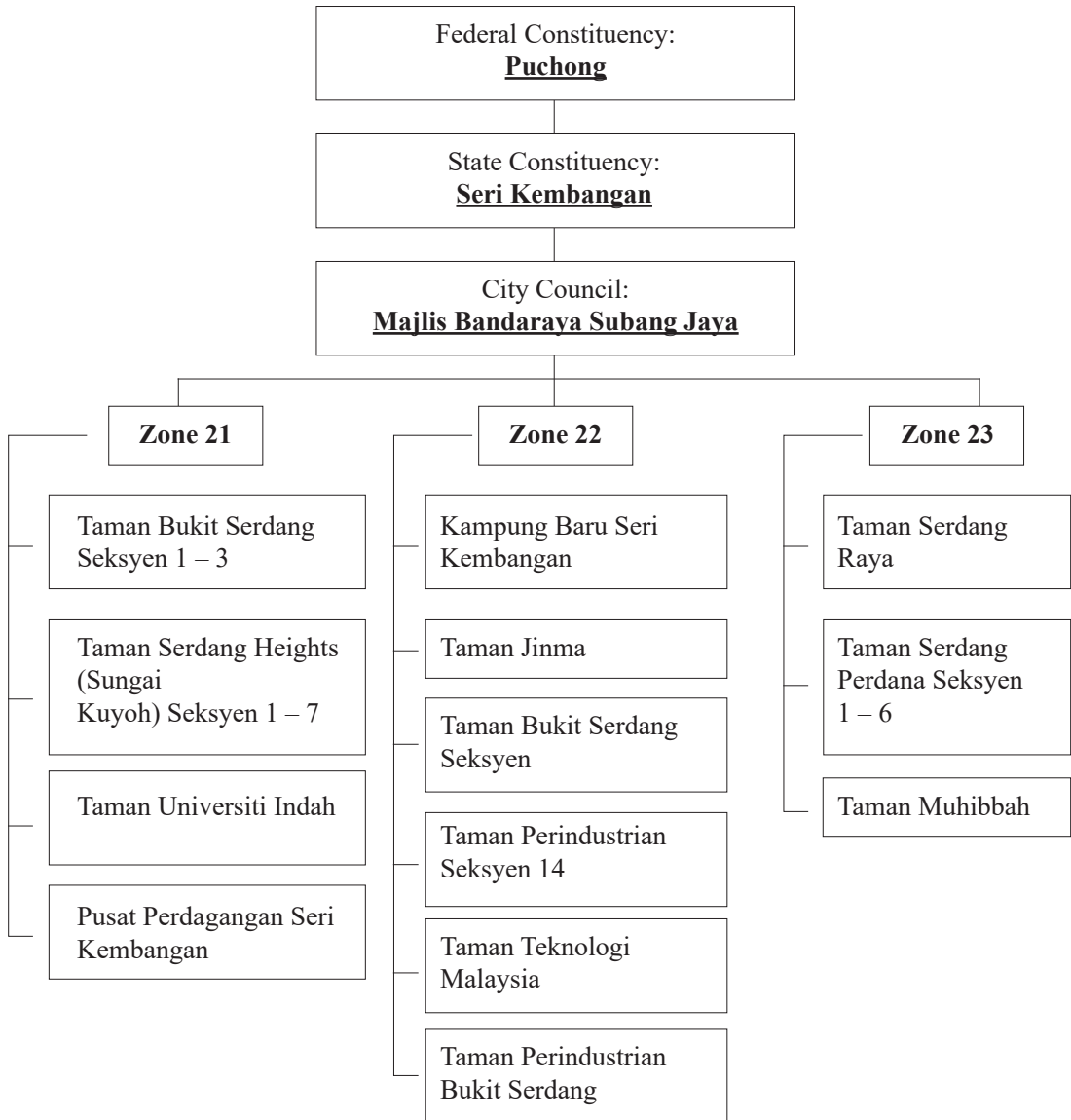
Source: Compiled by the author

The Greater Serdang region is located within the Petaling District, one of the nine districts in Selangor. The administrative unit of a district is essential for local community development. In the district of Petaling in Selangor, the main administrative bodies include the Petaling District and Land Office and the city councils of Shah Alam, Petaling Jaya, and Subang Jaya. The District handles tasks related to district and land administration, including land alienation, usage and development, revenue collection, and land taxation. It also enforces land laws and regulations and manages regional development initiatives (Pejabat Daerah/Tanah Hulu Langat, 2018). The town councils—under the Local Government Act 1976 (Act 171), are responsible for matters impacting people’s livelihoods, focus on the community’s direct needs. The Greater Serdang region, including the New Village, falls under the administration of the Pekan Serdang of Petaling Mukim. The New Village represents the lowest administrative unit known as *Kampung* (Village).

Within the local government administrative structure, this region is managed by the Subang Jaya City Council (Majlis Bandaraya Subang Jaya or MBSJ), formerly known as Subang Jaya Municipal Council (Majlis Perbandaran Subang Jaya or MPSJ). The upgrade from a municipal to a city council status was officially declared on 20 October 2020, under the Local Government Act 1976 (Act 171) (MBSJ, 2024). The zones that encompass the Greater Serdang region are designated as Zone 21, Zone 22, and Zone 23 under the city council. Each of these zones is represented by a Councillor who is appointed by the State government (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Administrative Divisions of Greater Serdang Region in the Puchong Federal Constituency



Source: Adapted from *Ahli Majlis*, by MBSJ, 2024, <https://www.mbsj.gov.my/ms/info-korporat/info-pengurusan/ahli-majlis> (compiled by the author)

Situated in Zone 22, Serdang New Village is specially managed by the Committee of Village Development and Security (Jawatankuasa Pembangunan dan Keselamatan Kampung or JPKK), formerly known as Village Community Management Council (Majlis Pengurusan

Komuniti Kampung or MPKK). The village chief serves as the chairperson of this committee, which is administratively under the state government. In addition to the JPKK/MPKK, there is also the Federal Committee on Village Development and Security (Jawatankuasa Pembangunan dan Keselamatan Kampung Persekutuan or JPKKP), previously known as the Federal Village Community Management Council (Majlis Pengurusan Komuniti Kampung Persekutuan or MPKKP). The JPKKP was established in 2008 after the BN federal government lost control of the state government of Selangor. Unlike the JPKK, the JPKKP is administratively under the federal government. Both the JPKK and JPKKP have the primary function of planning and implementing projects and programs within the village, as well as encouraging the involvement of the local community. They serve as intermediaries at the grassroots level, addressing problems or complaints by channelling them to the relevant authorities. Their role is crucial in mobilising community participation and ensuring effective communication between the village residents and higher levels of government (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, 2024). Thus, there were two JPKK/MPKK in Serdang New Village, one was appointed by the state government, and another by the federal government.

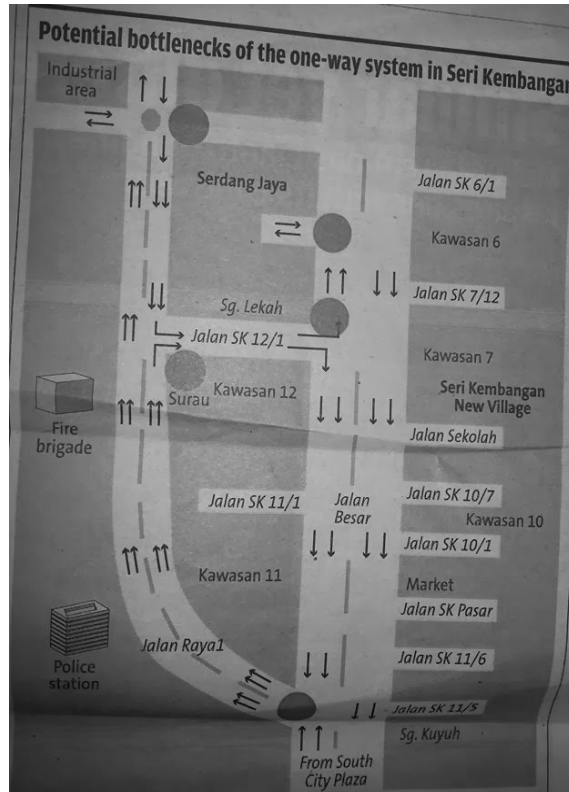
Key Political and Governance Challenges

Although Serdang New Village is the oldest community in the Greater Serdang area, it is confronted with political uncertainties and lacks long-term planning to align developments brought about by national political changes. This has continuously interfered with its administrative management system and impacted its community development during the urbanisation process. As the core area of Greater Serdang, failure to align with the pace of urbanisation of surrounding areas, it may forfeit its central role as a communal hub and eventually be overshadowed or marginalised to its detriment in future development. It is essential to understand the dilemmas and challenges encountered by the New Village with the purpose to address its administrative, political and governance issues of in order to maximise its developmental benefits.

Serdang New Village faces governance issues and challenges arising from the impact of the spread the urbanisation processes. Among the most serious and persistent problems are the outdated traffic system and management of the morning market reconstruction plan. Traffic congestion exacerbated by urbanisation, increased car ownership, and new residential developments. This main artery that connects to key locations such as Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Kajang has failed to keep pace with the growing population and traffic demand. In 2013, a RM36 million road reconstruction project converted this artery from two-way traffic flow to a one-way system (Figure 5). However, it provided only temporary relief as congestion returned due to population growth and rising vehicle numbers (Figure 6). Traffic jams now disrupt businesses and deter visiting customers (Veena & Mohd, 2018). Persistent congestion also encourages younger residents to relocate and accelerating the population ageing.

Figure 5

Schematic Diagram of the One-Way Traffic System on Jalan Besar



Source: The Star, 2013, March 2

Figure 6

The Main Street after Conversion into One-Way Traffic System



Source: Berita Harian, 2018, April 5

The traffic issues in Serdang highlight challenges stemming from overlapping management and political fragmentation. These complexities are exacerbated by the involvement of multiple authorities under different political jurisdictions, leading to administrative inefficiencies and stagnation. Since 2008, the federal government, controlled by BN, and the Pakatan-led Selangor state government have often clashed, impacting local development. The main artery comes under the jurisdiction of the federal Public Works Department, and the nearby Sungai Besi Expressway, managed by the Malaysian Highway Authority, are key examples. Political disputes between the MCA and DAP further complicated the situation, with each side blaming the other for failing to address long-standing traffic issues (*Sin Chew Daily*, 2022, May 3; *Guang Ming Daily*, 2022, May 28). Despite federal jurisdiction, the Selangor state government under Pakatan funded and implemented a re-routing plan for the main road in 2014. The plan included constructing a high-rise U-turn flyover and expanding intersections at the Sungai Besi and North-South Expressways (*Sin Chew Daily*, 2014, Jun 6). However, the project has been delayed for a decade, leaving traffic congestion unresolved and highlighting the detrimental impact of fragmented governance.

Local governments are tasked with maintaining and improving traffic systems, including flyovers, pedestrian bridges, and traffic lights, necessitating coordination across administrative levels. Despite Malaysia's federal structure, the abolition of local council elections in 1965 led to significant centralisation. For decades, the BN coalition's dominance at federal and state levels minimised state-federal friction. However, recent political shifts have introduced competition, affecting local development processes. Centralisation has constrained state and local governments' financial and administrative capacities. Wealthy states such as Selangor can fund projects on traffic improvement but less developed states rely on federal allocations.

New Villages suffer from these challenges. Village chief, Hong Lin Tai noted that Serdang's development lacks a clear blueprint, relying on ad hoc actions by local councillors. Thus, policy transparency and public participation are essential for aligning with government objectives.⁵ actions with community needs. Reintroducing local council elections could enhance transparency and accountability by enabling citizens to monitor representatives and local decisions. However, Malaysia's political and ethnic complexities make this unlikely in the short term. Within the current framework, mechanisms to increase transparency and civic engagement, such as the example of Serdang's morning market reconstruction, remain critical for addressing these challenges.

The reconstruction of Serdang's morning market has been a long-standing controversy. Established in 1949, the market underwent reconstruction on two occasions in the 1960s and 1980s but retained its traditional open-air design. Over time, overcrowding, narrow aisles, and poor hygiene have led to calls for modernisation (Pusat Komuniti Rakyat Serdang, 2009). In 2012, the new *Bazar Rakyat* (People's Market) was opened in Section 6 to alleviate congestion, but it failed to attract the same patronage as the original market, leaving the relocation issue unresolved. In 2023,

the stalls were temporarily relocated to Section 6 to facilitate reconstruction, but the plan has faced delays. A proposed two-story design costing RM9 million was opposed by vendors who preferred a single-story layout. The current budget of RM6 million is insufficient for a two-story pasar, and the project awaits new blueprints to be selected through an architectural competition (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 2023, Apr 19; *Sin Chew Daily*, 2024, Apr 22). This situation underscores issues of policy transparency and public participation. While the government consulted vendors, ordinary residents—who are equally affected—were largely excluded from the decision-making process. Many residents reported receiving information passively through news reports or directives, reflecting a broader disconnect between local governance and community involvement.

These challenges highlight governance deficiencies in Malaysia's centralised political system. Local governance in Malaysia operates within a centralised political framework, offering limited autonomy and public engagement. Lee (2012) observes that public participation in Malaysia is generally inadequate, with many Malaysians unaware of planning processes, challenges, and regulations. Since local elections were abolished, councillors are appointed by state governments, leaving the public unfamiliar with their local councillors compared to elected members. The outcome is that state assembly members often take on councillors' roles at the expense of governance deficiencies. Councillors have limited resources, receiving only allowances (e.g., RM 2,000–2,500 in Selangor) and typically serving part-time basis (Amar, 2024). This normally restricts their effectiveness in managing local affairs. Consequently, state assembly members and, occasionally, members of parliament, step in to address local needs, blurring governance roles. This neglect of local councils limits public participation, as higher-level governance bodies, with broader responsibilities, fail to engage the community effectively. As Lee (2012) notes, public participation in Malaysia often amounts to briefing sessions on government projects rather than genuine consultation, further undermining policy transparency and inclusivity.

Local Governance Improvements and Urban New Villages

The local council is a key factor in community development. It implements policies and regulations that shape the physical and social environment and ensures the operation of essential public services, develops and maintains infrastructure, in an attempt to promote the community's sustainability. A robust and efficient local government in the form of the local council plays a key role community life especially in urbanising New Villages that frequently face developmental problems arising from ageing the lack of long-term planning. This study of Serdang New Village facilitates an analysis of the impact of governance deficiencies on the sustainable development and urbanisation of New Villages in general by focusing on local governance and administrative challenges.

New Villages, born out of unique historical and political contexts, encounter new problems

brought about by the urbanisation process. This demands a critical examination of the administrative system that has to operate, adapt, and resolve various local governance challenges. It is noted that local administrative and institutional deficiencies are directly linked to the processes of urbanisation and sustainable development. New Villages that are situated on the outskirts of cities demand higher efficiency and quicker service delivery from local governments. The residents of urban New Villages face transition pressures, infrastructure needs, and community service expectations that far exceed those of New Villages in rural areas. The juxtaposition with urban areas amplifies the severity of local issues that may affect the prospects of sustainable development and the quality of life of New Villages. Although local governments are present at the city, municipal or district levels, the administrative system and operations are generally identical and devolves from a centralised governance system in a top-down approach. While this governance model may be advantageous in homogenous rural settings, it may fail to adequately respond to the complexities and diversity, thereby becoming increasingly inadequate during the transition from rural to urban areas, particularly with urban New Villages.

Overall, the deficiencies in local governance impact the sustainable development and urbanisation of Malaysia's urban New Villages in several ways. Primarily, the lack of effective bottom-up governance and public participation continues to be influenced by centralised governance or reliant solely on temporary political measures, leading to local development plans that do not align with local priorities. Urban New Villages, which often need to respond to urbanisation demands while also avoiding being overwhelmed by the process, must safeguard their identities and inherent interests on a sustainable basis. The misalignment between local needs and development policies will stifle the potential for sustainable urban integration. Additionally, local administrative personnel and councillors act as the link between residents and local authorities in playing their role in implementing a bottom-up administrative system, and ideally sharing and balancing powers with higher-level state assembly members. However, with limited resources and capabilities, councillors in the current administrative system are not adequately positioned to effectively perform a bottom-up role. Limited capabilities and funding also slow the pace of improvements such as upgrading road networks and enhancing public facilities that are essential for supporting urban lifestyles and attracting investment. When state assembly members double up as local councillors, their roles and responsibilities between state and local levels are blurred, leading to inefficiencies in service management and project implementation. In urban New Villages, where there is a greater demand for infrastructure and community services due to higher population densities, such inefficiencies can exacerbate problems of congestion, poor waste management, and inadequate public transportation, further impacting sustainable development. Lastly, Malaysia's local governance often overlooks smaller governance units and relies on higher-level bodies for decision-making. This top-down planning, if lacking effective negotiations, can directly impact local development, and when

central and local authorities belong to different political entities, may lead to failed negotiations. Additionally, neglecting local governance units can lead to a lack of tailored local solutions. Given the uniqueness of urban New Villages, specific strategies are needed to balance welcoming urbanisation while maintaining their distinct characteristics.

To address these issues, tangible reform suggestions may be proposed, such as by enhancing public participation through strengthening public consultation, ensuring broad resident involvement in planning and executing urban development projects, and collecting feedback through community meetings and public hearings. Additionally, clarifying the division of powers between state and local levels to reduce role overlap and enable local governments to focus more on daily management and development issues is essential. Lastly, formulating specific development strategies and blueprints for urban New Villages independent of piecemeal political measures is crucial. Given the unique socio-economic structures and cultural backgrounds of urban New Villages, policies tailored to address their specific challenges are necessary. However, these reform measures are merely symptomatic; they do not address the root causes of the issues. The optimal approach would involve systemic changes, such as restoring local elections, reinstating accountability mechanisms, and directly enhancing public participation to achieve an effective bottom-up administrative system. But given Malaysia's political realities, it is clear that such changes are unlikely to occur in the short term. Therefore, it may be suggested that, specifically for urban New Villages, that reforms start with the powers of village committees and village chiefs to realise a governance model that combines both bottom-up and top-down approaches.

Given the current circumstances under which local elections are unlikely to be restored, an option is to reform the Village Committees (JPKK/MPKK) and village chiefs to address the deficiencies in local government administration affecting urban New Villages. The ultimate goal is to integrate both top-down and bottom-up governance models to maximise sustainable development. The intention of the Ministry of Rural Development (2019) is that the function and purpose of the MPKK would facilitate the planning and implementation of village development plans through a bottom-up approach with local community involvement to create prosperous villages. However, several reforms are proposed below to enable JPKK/MPKK operations to more effectively achieve their objectives.

First is the reinstatement of elected village committee chair or the village head, as was the case before 1966, when village chiefs were elected by secret ballot (Abdullah, 1978). For instance, in Selangor, the current village committee chairs and members are primarily appointed by state and district governments, similar to the councillors. This direct appointment method not only weakens public participation but also often leads to government-appointed personnel being out of sync with the actual needs of the community. Electing village chiefs could help establish a direct, transparent relationship between the villagers and local governance, encouraging them to play an active role

in societal issues and enhancing public participation. Additionally, elected chiefs would be directly accountable to their voters, which could lead to greater oversight and assurance of policy needs and transparency. Direct democracy and participatory democracy are thus promoted to ensure sustainable development.

Second, the roles and resources of village chiefs and committee members need to be enhanced. Under the current statutory framework, the responsibilities of an JPKK/MPKK chair can broadly be summarised as a liaison between the government and the community. This includes presiding over annual meetings, supervising activities of various departments, overseeing village development activities, managing and reporting on financial and land issues of the village, supervising the use of public facilities, and being responsible for updating key village development documents (Ministry of Rural Development, 2019). According to interviews with the village chief of Serdang New Village, the daily work of their committee largely focuses on community welfare and assistance, such as organising festival celebrations, distributing charity meals, and informing villagers of government policies and welfare support when complaints and difficulties are received. Overall, the powers of the village committees and chiefs are limited, serving merely as a communication bridge. Therefore, in promoting elected village chiefs, their roles should also be elevated to grant them greater autonomy in planning and implementing community projects, especially regarding improvements to infrastructure and community services, enabling them to autonomously execute projects based on local needs.

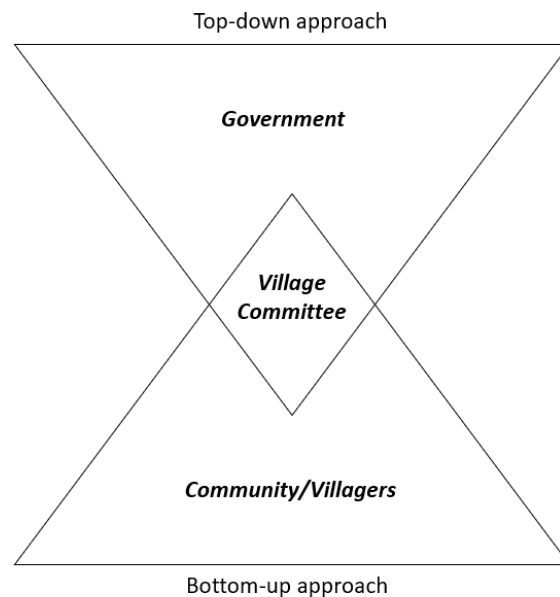
Furthermore, village chiefs and members must serve on a full-time basis with fixed salaries and working conditions commensurate with their responsibilities. Instead, they are entitled only to a monthly allowance. According to Dewan Negeri Selangor (2024), the allowance for an MPKK chair is RM 1,500 per month, while other members, except for the secretary, receive no allowance. Given that most view this position as part-time, it is necessary to improve salaries and working conditions to ensure that village chiefs and members can fully commit to community work. This reform suggestion has long been proposed by Abdullah (1977), not only the position of the village chief should be made fulltime and to become a salaried civil servant, but also the salary should be commensurate with the responsibilities of the position.

It is also recommended that a bidirectional governance approach be adopted to integrate the top-down and bottom-up approaches to facilitate effective management and sustainable development in urban New Villages (Figure 7). In fact, both top-down and bottom-up approaches have respective advantages and disadvantages. Top-down planning, which is sector-focused, often struggles to integrate community-specific priorities (Sherman & Ford, 2013). Nonetheless, higher-level governments possess a broader awareness of long-term factors that local communities may not fully comprehend, allowing them to implement strategic responses effectively. They also hold the authority and resources necessary to develop and modify policies that facilitate local decision-

making (Adger et al., 2005). Conversely, while a community-based bottom-up approach can empower marginalised individuals, its localised focus may overlook broader influences (Scoones, 2013). As a result, strategies developed in this manner tend to be shaped by the community members' limited experience of local factors and their immediate needs, constrained by their limited power (Conway & Mustelin, 2014). Therefore, there are potential cooperation between these approaches that, if maximised, could enhance adaptive capacity more effectively than either approach alone. Given Malaysia's current political landscape, it is sensible to adopt this integrated approach to reform local governance in urban New Villages without disrupting the country's existing state of affairs.

Figure 7

Bidirectional Governance Perspective in Urban New Villages



Source: Illustrated by the author

The bidirectional governance model enables the village committee and the village chief to play a crucial intermediary role, effectively bridging the gap between governmental policymaking and the specific needs of the community. This strategic positioning is aimed at maximising the effectiveness of these two governance approaches. In fact, local governance structures presently in Malaysia are also striving to integrate these dual approaches. However, the bidirectional governance model distinguishes itself by proposing that the chair of the village committee be elected directly by the villagers. Furthermore, this role is envisioned to transition into a salaried civil

service position, potentially supplanting local councillors in certain capacities, particularly in areas typically overlooked by local councils. Thus, this proposed reform specifically aims to enhance the village committee's capacity to serve as an effective intermediary between the government and the community, filling a critical gap in the existing governance framework.

In the bottom-up governance model, the improvements and optimisations brought by the elected and enhanced village chief system include the following points: First, it enhances the democratic nature of local governance. Village chiefs elected directly by the villagers can more accurately reflect the community's desires and needs. Besides enhancing villagers' control over local governance, making committee decisions more aligned with public opinion, this also plays a positive role in promoting sustainable development in urban New Villages. Additionally, this democratic nature increases community participation, stimulating residents' involvement and civic responsibility. Through participating in elections, residents directly impact the management and development of their living environment, enhancing community cohesion.

Second, the establishment of accountability systems and enhanced transparency; elected village chiefs are accountable to their voters, which on one hand, encourages chiefs to actively respond to residents' needs during their tenure, and on the other hand, increases the transparency of their policies and actions. Voters have the right to monitor the performance of the village chiefs and provide feedback in subsequent elections, establishing a robust accountability system. Furthermore, regularly held elections provide the community with opportunities to correct and adjust leadership, promoting a healthy development of the political environment and ensuring the effective implementation of community development. This allows for timely adjustments and reassignments of unsuitable policies and personnel, which leads to the next improvement—Third, enhancing policy responsiveness and adaptability; under the election system, village chiefs need to maintain their voters' support, making them more sensitive to changes in community needs under the push of responsibilities and systems. Given the variable and rapid development of urban New Villages, chiefs need to quickly adjust strategies to meet different community needs, ensuring policies and projects are adapted to the community's development stage and specific requirements, thereby enhancing policy effectiveness and community satisfaction.

These are the positive impacts of the reformed village committee and village chief duties on the bottom-up governance approach. In fact, as an intermediary force, their optimisation and reform also affect the top-down governance approach. Firstly, it enhances policy implementation efficiency; when village chiefs have a stronger sense of local identity and a basis in public opinion, they can more accurately understand and convey the government's policy intentions, thus improving the local adaptability and implementation efficiency of higher-level policies. Additionally, as a bridge between the government and the community, elected village chiefs can also enhance villagers' familiarity of them, more effectively achieving top-down communication, conveying government

policy objectives and resource allocation to the community, and also representing the community in making demands and suggestions to the government, promoting timely policy adjustments, and strengthening policy feedback mechanisms. It also increases the participatory nature of policy-making. As public officials and collaborators in government policies, village chiefs can participate in earlier discussions and the formulation of policies, ensuring that policies consider community interests and characteristics from the beginning, promoting collaborative policy-making, and enhancing policy transparency.

In summary, through the elected village chief system and optimisation of chiefs' roles, the bidirectional dynamic governance model aims to achieve significant results in both top-down and bottom-up governance. The characteristics of this bidirectional dynamic governance model ultimately point to three principles: interactivity, adaptability, and transparency. First, the interaction between the government and the community is not single-directional but bidirectional and dynamic, in terms of communication and decision making. Second, the governance structure and policies can be adapting, adjusting, and optimising based on the community's needs to suit its different developmental stages. Third, the decision-making process must be transparent to ensure that all stakeholders are involved and understand how decisions are made.

Conclusion

Sustainable development is a common vision for urban areas, and Serdang, as an urban New Village, is no exception. Therefore, good governance is prioritised, highlighting the extensive and profound importance of governance in aspects of local development. For New Villages that were previously excluded from development policies in the nation, an effective governance framework and policy implementation are important to reintegrating them into a positive development trajectory. Within this governance framework, local government serves as the final and most critical link in achieving good local governance which directly connecting to the community and the residents. However, as studied by Phang (2008), because local governments in Malaysia operate within a centralised political system, there is little encouragement for local autonomy or public participation. Although the federal government promotes principles of good governance such as transparency, accountability, and participation, the subordinate status of local governments within the government hierarchy hinders or weakens their ability to freely engage with the community. Local governments are continually criticised for delays, poor attitudes, ineffective enforcement, and arrogance. Therefore, discussions and initiatives regarding administration decentralisation have been frequently mentioned over the past two decades.

In Malaysia, the administrative framework attempts to employ a mix of decentralisation, devolution, and de-concentration strategies. However, it tends to favour the central powers of the

federal government, despite ostensibly supporting administrative decentralisation. Essentially, this form of decentralisation aims to enhance governance and the delivery of services by minimising delays and bureaucratic procedures across various government levels. Nonetheless, it is expected that the community would also significantly benefit from this decentralisation, as it should lead to a transfer of powers to citizens. In a democratic setting, the interaction between the government and its citizens creates an environment conducive to delegating powers, facilitated by public involvement in activities such as electing local officials (Phang, 2011). However, initiatives to restore local elections are often accompanied by additional political baggage and political intentions, and combined with the current political reality in Malaysia, it will not be possible to restore local elections in a short period of time. It can be observed that Malaysian often shows their desire to be engaged and directly involved in the process of local decision making through institutions such as non-governmental organisations, neighbourhood and residents' associations. To a certain degree, within the current administrative framework, the village committee, JPKK/MPKK, exhibits characteristics similar to those of residents' associations, which both serve as intermediaries between the government and the residents, facilitating communication and addressing community issues. Therefore, this study suggests that in addressing local governance issues in urban New Villages, it would be more appropriate to focus on restoring village chief elections and reforming the village committee, rather than pursuing initiatives to reinstate local council elections at present.

Certainly, the bottom-up governance approach which enhancing public participation is not solely achievable by initiating electoral mechanisms. While civic and political engagement in Malaysia is commonly limited to voting and elections, the avenues and methods for such participation are actually more diverse. In addition to traditional activities related to voting and elections, this includes engaging in political demonstrations, protests, and marches, signing petitions, writing political articles, and even reading, sharing, and commenting on political and social news on social media, all of which are expressions of civic rights. It is important to note that positive and effective expressions of civic power should not manifest through pointless vitriol and criticism but should instead be conveyed through constructive criticism that fosters progress. Citizenship is a "membership of a political community assembled within a set of interrelations between rights, duties, participation and identity" (Delanty, 2000, p.9). In Malaysia, a key challenge is the lack of civic consciousness linking individual responsibility to collective community outcomes. Sustainable development cannot be driven solely by top-down policies—it must be a shared effort where citizens embrace their roles, safeguard their participation rights, and build mechanisms to hold authorities accountable.

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Notes

- 1 The vast literature on New Villages includes publications by Corry (1954), Markandan (1954), Sandhu (1964a and b), Nyce (1973), Phang (2008 & 2011), Voon (2009) and many others.
- 2 Based on the authors' verification and measurements, the commonly cited figure of 834 hectares for Serdang New Village—frequently referenced in existing literature—includes not only the original village area but also its surrounding extension areas, such as Taman Universiti Indah, Taman Bukit Serdang, etc., which are collectively referred to as Greater Serdang in this paper. In contrast, the core area of Serdang New Village, comprising Sections 1 through 13, covers approximately 143 hectares.
- 3 Interviewee: Dato' Yap Pian Hon (Former Member of Parliament and State Assemblyman for Serdang), Interviewer: Cheng Jau Mei, Location: Serdang New Village, Date: 21 Aug 2024
- 4 The May 13 Incident was a political conflict that erupted on May 13, 1969, following opposition gains in the general election. A post-election parade by opposition supporters in Kuala Lumpur led to clashes with government supporters, escalating into violent riots. In response, the government declared a state of emergency, suspended Parliament, and placed the country under the National Operations Council until 1971. In the same year, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced to address ethnic economic disparities, and the ruling coalition was later restructured into Barisan Nasional (BN) in 1974 to strengthen political stability.
- 5 Interviewee: Hong Lin Tai (Chairman of JPKK Kampung Baru Seri Kembangan), Interviewer: Cheng Jau Mei, Location: Pusat Khidmat Dun Seri Kembangan, Date: 12 June 2024

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