# Recent Reforms in Strengthening Community Governance under the Rukun Tetangga (Amendment) Act 2026 and Its Implications in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

The Rukun Tetangga (Amendment) Act 2026 (Act A1789) advances Malaysia's legal framework for grassroots community administration and neighbourhood-based governance. Rukun Tetangga began as a security-focused community project in 1975 during national instability, but it has since expanded to include social cohesion, community welfare, mediation, voluntary patrols, and local coordination. This article examines the principal reforms introduced by the 2026 Amendment Act, including the statutory definition of "person who has an interest" in an area, revised eligibility rules for committee membership, changes to tenure and reappointment, and the imposition of citizenship requirements for participation in the Voluntary Patrolling Scheme. Using community governance as an analytical framework, the article argues that the Amendment strengthens legal certainty, institutional continuity, and administrative coherence within the Rukun Tetangga system. At the same time, it narrows inclusion by restricting future participation by non-citizens and permanent residents, while preserving strong administrative oversight of community institutions. This article concludes that the Amendment strengthens community governance in a limited and qualified sense, primarily through managerial and institutional consolidation rather than democratic or participatory deepening.

**Keywords:** Rukun Tetangga, Community Governance, Community Participation, Community Safety, Community Development

## INTRODUCTION

Rukun Tetangga is unique within Malaysia's legal and institutional framework for social cohesion, neighbourhood organisation, and grassroots government. The Department of National Unity and National Integration (JPNIN) runs the Skim Rukun Tetangga (SRT) to promote social cohesion in Malaysia's heterogeneous society. A volunteer community-based organisation, the system promotes community unity and development through neighbourhood engagement. Kawasan Rukun Tetangga (KRT) are areas where the scheme is implemented. When it was developed in 1975, KRT focused on residential security, enabling communities to monitor and safeguard their neighbourhoods. Its role expanded to include promoting neighbourhood-based well-being and organising activities to foster connections and relationships among residents of diverse religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Since 2001, KRT has worked toward a broader community development model, changing its organisation, infrastructure, and functions to serve local communities better (Embong et al., 2024).

This institutional position was legalised by the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 (Act 751). The Act formalised Rukun Tetangga areas and Area Committees, established a Voluntary Patrolling Scheme, and gave such committees greater responsibility. These duties extended beyond community safety, as Section 8 of the Act empowered committees to improve neighbourliness, harmony, welfare, health, economic well-being, and quality of life; to observe and report on community conflict; to help residents avoid crime and disaster; and to mediate community

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disputes. The 2012 Act also recognised Rukun Tetangga as a tool for community administration rather than security. Also, the Act integrated Rukun Tetangga with local leadership, social coordination, and low-level dispute resolution.

The first Part of this paper reviews the literature on community governance and community participation. The Second Part explores the historical background and legal landscape of local governance, from the evolution of Rukun Tetangga in 1975 to the creation of the Rukun Tetangga Act in 2012. The policy underlying community governance is then discussed under this heading. The crux of the paper lies in Part Three, which examines the extensive reforms brought about by the 2026 Amendment Act. Part Four examines the theoretical implications of the Amendment Act, followed by the legal implications in Part Five and policy implications in Part Six. Part Seven explores the practical implications of the reforms before concluding the paper in Part Eight by contending that the 2026 Amendment strengthens community governance in a qualified sense: it consolidates institutional frameworks and enhances continuity, but does so at the expense of broader inclusivity and participatory legitimacy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Community Governance as an Analytical Concept

Community governance emerged from frustration with binary models that relied on the market or the state to address social concerns. Communities should be considered as governance structures because they can address problems that markets and governments fail to resolve, especially when trust, repeated interaction, local knowledge, and norm enforcement are important (Bowles & Gintis, 2001). Hence, they contend that rust, reciprocity, shared norms, and a willingness to punish antisocial behaviour constitute social capital for community governance. Thus, it is crucial when formal contracts are insufficient or when state actors lack dispersed social information to control conduct (Bowles & Gintis, 2001). This situation is important for neighbourhood-based institutions, which rely on face-to-face interaction, informal accountability, and shared norms.

In addition, Totikidis, Armstrong, and Francis (2005) define community governance as community-level management and decision making by, with, or on behalf of community-by-community stakeholders (Totikidis et al., 2005). Noting that community governance is not a single institutional structure is helpful, and it should be perceived as a continuum. Community members make certain decisions, public agencies make others, and state or quasi-state actors make others on behalf of the community. Commentators argue that community governance goes beyond decision-making to fulfil community needs, increase capacity, and improve well-being. Consequently, community governance involves both institutional and social goals (Totikidis et al., 2005).

Community governance also relates to democracy, legitimacy, and empowerment (Somerville, 2005). He further states that community governance is decision-making at a scale suited to identified communities, allowing significant citizen involvement in their living conditions. With this perspective, governance goes beyond consultation. How well an institution promotes community influence, accountability, and participatory legitimacy is increasingly significant. Hence, community governance would include local safety, social cohesion, mediation, and community coordination (JPNIN, 2021; Rukun Tetangga Act 2012). Thus, Rukun Tetangga's legal design must enable a genuine, representative community government system to participate.

Even when effective in regulating behaviour, Bowles and Gintis (2001) warn that community governance may rely on insider-outsider differences that are morally and politically problematic. Murdoch and Abram (1998) suggest that community governance generally occurs within state boundaries, especially when central institutions dominate strategic lines and allow only selective local input. Thus, community governance is neither democratic nor inclusive. It can empower local players, institutionalise exclusion, maintain hierarchy, or exert state control (Bowles & Gintis, 2001; Murdoch & Abram, 1998). The tension involved would be beneficial in evaluating the 2026 Amendment Act.

### Community Participation

Two notions must be distinguished, since community governance often involves participation. Fraser (2005) claims that "community participation" is not politically neutral and may vary depending on the process's goals, players, and priorities. Participation can empower, manage, symbolise, or exclude. Thus, participation does not guarantee democratisation. A procedure can involve the community while maintaining top-down control over key choices (Fraser, 2005). This observation is crucial to this study, as legal amendments that improve a community institution's administrative efficiency may limit its membership.

Khwaja (2004) contends that heightened community involvement may not always be desirable. Using the concept of poverty rights, he illustrates that participation involves information exchange, influence, and ownership of decision-making (Khwaja, 2004). His empirical study shows that increasing community participation improves decisions based on local knowledge but may deteriorate technical decisions where the community lacks comparative experience (Khwaja, 2004). This notion is philosophically important because it shows that the governance concern is how to structure participation based on the decision being made, rather than whether it should be maximised. However, Khwaja (2004) argues that the more essential concerns are how involvement is structured, which choices it is best suited for, and how community actors and administrative authorities share influence.

Butterfoss (2006) underlines that involvement is both a process and an outcome. His views demonstrate that community participation should be judged by who participates, why, how, and how it influences decision-making (Butterfoss, 2006). Together with Fraser's (2005) warning that participation may be symbolic, managerial, or exclusionary and Khwaja's (2004) claim that participation is also about influence and ownership over decisions, this suggests that any assessment of the Rukun Tetangga governance must look beyond formal membership provisions to the institution's practical distribution of participation and influence. Thus, the question is not whether participation is legal, but what kind of participation is institutionalised, whose involvement is legally relevant and whether it leads to meaningful representation and influence (Butterfoss, 2006; Fraser, 2005; Khwaja, 2004).

The literature on the implications of community participation and neighbourhood watch on crime incidents in local communities indicates a positive effect. For example, Bennett, Holloway, and Farrington (2008) found that neighbourhood watch reduced crime by 16-26 per cent across the studies they analysed. They attribute this benefit to visible surveillance, reduced criminal opportunity, improved informal social control, and higher resident-police communication flow (Bennett et al., 2008). Their findings are significant for this paper because neighbourhood-based safety institutions can help the community when formal structures are supplemented by informal social regulation and local cooperation.

## THE MALAYSIAN LOCAL GOVERNANCE LANDSCAPE

### Historical and Legal Background of Rukun Tetangga

Rukun Tetangga began with the Malaysian state's efforts to maintain security, ethnic relations, and local order during national instability. According to the official JPNIN management guide, Tun Abdul Razak launched Skim Rukun Tetangga on August 29, 1975, at Kampung Kasipillay, Kuala Lumpur, after the Emergency Ordinance 1969 came into force (JPNIN, 2021). Abdullah et al. (2020) explain that the first Rukun Tetangga scheme was created amid internal security concerns, communal tension, and the state's efforts to promote social cohesion in a multi-ethnic society.

Thus, Rukun Tetangga began with a security logic, in which the JPNIN guide states that the scheme initially focused on residential safety. At the same time, historical literature shows that residents were tasked with maintaining neighbourhood security and ethnic harmony (JPNIN, 2021). According to the same guide's conceptual timeline, depicted in the Perubahan Konsep Rukun Tetangga diagram, the first phase, which ran from 1975 to 1982, was a security concept that required residents aged 18 to 55 to patrol the Area (JPNIN, 2021). According to Beh and Pue (2021), Rukun Tetangga was originally intended to foster unity and defend local communities against communist insurgency and ethnic strife. In the early days of Rukun Tetangga, it helped the government keep neighbourhoods secure. Community members arranged monitoring, vigilance, and order maintenance.

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On January 1, 1983, the government switched the Rukun Tetangga from security patrols to 'semangat kejiranan' or neighbourhood solidarity and togetherness (JPNIN, 2021). The JPNIN handbook (JPNIN, 2021) refers to this as the "neighbourhood concept," and Beh and Pue (2021) note that, after security improved, Rukun Tetangga focused on strengthening local community links. Such a shift indicates that Rukun Tetangga has moved from a security tool to a social institution.

The second major shift occurred in 2001 when the Rukun Tetangga was explicitly linked to community development. The government introduced pembangunan komuniti to empower communities to adapt to changing social conditions and new lifestyles, followed in 2010 by the Model Transformasi Rukun Tetangga, which is based on unity, economy, security, education, and quality of life (JPNIN, 2021). The Rukun Tetangga was introduced in 1975 to promote neighbourhood safety and was later reinforced through kejiranan and community development to promote harmony and collective welfare in local communities (Zakaria et al., 2018). By then, Rukun Tetangga was more than a patrol scheme. It was expected to promote grassroots social interaction, participation, and problem-solving.

The Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 legalised this institutional evolution, where on June 22 2012, the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 replaced the emergency-based framework with ordinary legislation. The constitutional and administrative change was significant. Instead of temporary emergency power, Rukun Tetangga had a statute that formalised its structure, officeholders, duties, and powers. The Director General, Rukun Tetangga areas, area centres, and the Rukun Tetangga Area Committee were established by Part II of the Act. Section 7(3)(d) of the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 allowed citizens and permanent residents to serve on committees, while section 7 originally allowed residents, interested parties, and others approved by the Director. Section 7(4) of the Act provides for a limited committee tenure of two years, with reappointment allowed for up to three terms, unless approved by the Director General.

Furthermore, Section 8 of the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 indicates that Rukun Tetangga had become a community governance institution by 2012. Rukun Tetangga committees are instructed to strengthen neighbourliness, unity, goodwill, harmony, safety, welfare, health, economic well-being, and quality of life; and to observe and report on community conflict. It also helps residents protect themselves from criminal activity or disaster, and mediate community disputes (Rukun Tetangga Act 2012). In the areas of welfare, conflict management, and social cohesion, the law recognised Rukun Tetangga as a community institution with roles in security and development. The Voluntary Patrolling Scheme maintained security under Part III of the Act. Sections 15 and 17 of the Act addressed who could request the scheme and who would serve in it. Skim Rondaan Sukarela (SRS) had long operated under Rukun Tetangga, first under the 1975 regulations as amended in 1988 and then under the 2012 statutory framework (Zakaria et al., 2018). This scheme confirms Rukun Tetangga's hybrid patrol-tool, local-governance platform nature.

Rukun tetangga in Malaysia originated from a community safety framework and retains the Voluntary Patrolling Scheme as a legislative component. Rukun Tetangga's hybridity is evident, in which the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 goes beyond security. Section 8 of the Act assigns the Area Committee additional duties, including promoting neighbourliness, harmony, welfare, and health. Economic well-being and quality of life are included, as are observing and reporting conflict, protecting residents from crime or disaster, and community mediation. Rukun Tetangga is presented as a multifunctional community platform that links voluntary patrolling, mediation, youth and women's participation, local welfare, health, and neighbourhood development in the 2021 JPNIN management guide.

### Community Governance Policy in Malaysia

Malaysian literature suggests that community governance operates within a highly structured administrative framework rather than a decentralised local democracy. Phang and Goh (2011) contend that Malaysian local government is entrenched in a central–state–local dynamic, in which central policy directives consistently influence local administration, alongside ongoing apprehensions about decentralisation and re-centralisation. Ahmad (2016; 2026) advocates a bottom-up, participatory governance model for sustainable community development in Malaysia, contending that successful community development relies not solely on formal governmental intervention but also on community engagement, local institutional capacity, collaborative decision-making, and stronger connections between local stakeholders and public authorities. Abdul Manaf, Mad Zan, and Ananthan (2017) contend that community perceptions of Malaysian local government governance are moderate rather than strong, and enhanced governance requires engagement at the federal, state, local, and community levels. These findings show that the Malaysian issue is whether institutional frameworks permit meaningful, sustained, and responsive local governance (Abdul Manaf et al., 2017; Ahmad, 2016).

Recent Malaysian literature argues that administrative traditions, rather than a particular paradigm, shape local governance, with Malaysian local government drawing on multiple traditions, including classical public administration, New Public Management (NPM), and New Public Governance (NPG), as noted by Hughes, Orr, and Yusoff (2023). They contend that Malaysian local governance exhibits a hybrid model in which New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG) characteristics coexist with persistent centralist traditions, resulting in uneven collaboration and stakeholder participation, and a lack of comprehensive democratisation or decentralisation. Wan Sulaiman and Aziz's (2025) research on Kelantan local authorities reveals that bottom-up processes may achieve top-down transformation programs, but participation, transparency, and accountability remain inconsistent. These studies suggest that Malaysian local governance generally relies on regulated or mediated involvement rather than on community self-government (Hughes et al., 2023; Wan Sulaiman & Aziz, 2025).

The Malaysian background is crucial to Rukun Tetangga research, because local governance in Malaysia involves guided involvement, administrative monitoring, and limited decentralisation; therefore, Rukun Tetangga should not be considered a fully autonomous community entity. It is better understood as Part of a larger governance pattern in which local entities are expected to be community-responsive while being closely structured by the state.

## THE REFORMS UNDER THE RUKUN TETANGGA (AMENDMENT) ACT 2026

The Rukun Tetangga (Amendment) Act 2026 (Act A1789) was tabled in Parliament by the Minister of National Unity, Datuk Aaron Ago Dagang, in late November 2025. The main aims of the 2026 Amendment Act are to clarify eligibility rules, strengthen committee governance, and align tenure provisions with community leadership needs.

The Bill was passed in the Dewan Rakyat on December 2 2025, with majority support, reflecting bipartisan agreement to strengthen grassroots governance. The Dewan Negara approved it on December 17 2025, received Royal Assent on February 23 2026, and was gazetted on March 5 2026. It officially came into force on April 1 2026. In contrast, the Singapore Community Disputes Resolution Act 2015, amended in 2024, was streamlined, with its enforcement tied to ministerial discretion after Parliament has passed the law. However, in Indonesia, the Village Law 2014 was phased in, reflecting decentralisation across thousands of villages.

Considering that the statutory context of the 2026 Amendment Act introduces specific revisions to committee eligibility, tenure, reappointment, and involvement in the Voluntary Patrolling Scheme, these matters will be analysed in the section below.

### "Person who has an interest in the Area"

According to Section 2 of the 2026 Amendment Act, the definition of "person who has interest" in connection to an Area is added to Section 2 of Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 where those who own any property in the Area, carry on a business there, are employed there, or have a place of employment there, hold a position in an organisation, association, institution, or body established in or operating there, or have a family relationship with a resident there are included in the new definition.

The modification is necessary because the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 utilised the term "person who has an interest in the Area" in important sections 7 and 17, but did not define it. Thus, the 2026 Amendment Act clarifies and defines who can be considered to have a legal connection to a Rukun Tetangga Area. It also indicates that a local connection under the Act can arise through property, work, organisation, or family ties. Mahari and Azmi (2025) reported that the Rukun Tetangga (Amendment) Bill 2025 was tabled for first reading and was intended to clarify eligibility, tighten appointment rules, and standardise membership criteria for the voluntary patrolling scheme.

**Director-General's appointments**

Section 3 of the 2026 Amendment Act changes subsection 3(1) of the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 on the Director-General's appointments. The original Act required the Minister to nominate "a public servant" as Director General. The change adds "performing the duties of the head of the department charged with Rukun Tetangga." The statutory office is becoming more closely tied to the department's responsible administrative headship. The former provision was more open, but this clarifies the officeholder's institutional location. Mahari & Azmi (2025) contend that the Amendment was presented as providing certainty in the appointment of the Director General.

**Selection and Tenure of the Rukun Tetangga Area Committee**

Section 4 of the 2026 Amendment Act is the most important provision, as it amends Section 7 of the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 regarding the selection and tenure of the Rukun Tetangga Area Committee. Section 7 provides that a committee might include residents, local enthusiasts, and "other persons" recognised by the Director. The 2026 Amendment Act eliminates the last residual category. It replaces "such number of persons" with "such number of members," which is mostly a terminological change. Hence, it appears that administrative discretion is reduced, and committee membership is more regulated.

**Citizenship Restriction**

Section 4 of the 2026 Amendment Act changes subsection 7(3), which covers committee disqualification. Changes include replacing "A person" with "A resident or person who has interest," adding "under subsection (1)," and, most critically, removing "or a permanent resident" from paragraph (d). The Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 prohibited non-citizens and permanent residents. Permanent residence status is no longer considered in eligibility after the change. Together with the saving provision in section 9 of the amending Act, existing permanent resident committee members may continue temporarily. However, future committee membership is limited to citizens who meet the statutory qualifications. Mahari and Azmi (2025) suggest that committee membership would now consist of residents or people with an interest in the Area, while the Act itself confirms that citizenship requirements also limit future eligibility. Hence, unlike the Malaysian membership eligibility, which only allows citizens and persons with interest, in Singapore, the People's Association (PA) committees can include citizens and permanent residents, highlighting inclusivity and multicultural harmony. At the other end of the spectrum, the fully decentralised village autonomy governance model in Indonesia indicates that all village residents are included. This model also mandates, under the Village Law No 6/2014, that women and marginalised groups be represented in village decision-making.

**Tenure of the Local Committee Members**

Section 4 of the 2026 Amendment Act further amends subsection 7(4) by extending the term of office from not more than two years to three years in respect of the same Area and by reducing ordinary reappointment from a maximum of three consecutive terms to two consecutive terms. It then inserts a new subsection 7(5), which allows a person who ceases to be a member after two consecutive terms to be reappointed, with the approval of the Director-General, for one further period not exceeding one term immediately thereafter. The combined effect is a more structured tenure regime where a longer ordinary term may support continuity and programme stability. However, limiting ordinary reappointment to two consecutive terms curbs indefinite incumbency as routine practice. Bernama (2026) identified continuity of leadership as one of the 2026 Amendment's major focuses.

**The Revocation of Appointment and Resignation of Office Bearers**.

Section 5 of the 2026 Amendment Act substitutes section 9 of the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 on the revocation of appointment and resignation. This change is more important than a merely stylistic clarification. Under the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012, section 9 referred only to appointments under subsection 7(2), meaning appointments as Chairman, Deputy Chairman, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, or Treasurer. The new section 9 expressly covers both appointments under subsection 7(1) as members of the Rukun Tetangga Area Committee and appointments under subsection 7(2) as office-bearers. It also distinguishes revocation from resignation and separates resignation from both committee membership and office-bearing status. The 2026 Amendment, therefore, establishes a clearer, more comprehensive internal governance framework for committee membership and office-holding.

**The Applications to Operate a Voluntary Patrolling Scheme**

Section 6 of the 2026 Amendment Act amends subsection 15(1) of the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 on applications to operate a Voluntary Patrolling Scheme. Previously, the Chairman could act upon a request from a group of at least 20 area residents aged 18 or older. The amended provision now refers to twenty people, each of whom is a citizen, at least eighteen years old, and either a resident or a person who has an interest in the Area. The 2026 Amendment Act, therefore, reduces ambiguity and provides a clearer statutory basis for determining who may be treated as having a legally recognised connection to a Rukun Tetangga Area. It also shows that local connection under the Act is not confined to residence alone, but may arise through property, work, organisational participation, or family ties. This reading is also consistent with the commentators' views that the Amendment was intended to clarify eligibility, enhance transparency, and ensure that people with genuine connections to the Area are considered (Mahari & Azmi, 2025).

**Membership of the Voluntary Patrolling Scheme**

Section 7 of the 2026 Amendment Act makes a parallel amendment to subsection 17(1) on membership of the Voluntary Patrolling Scheme. Under the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012, membership may be sought by a resident of an Area, a person with an interest in the Area, or a person approved by a director. The 2026 Amendment Act removes the residual category of a person approved by a director. It substitutes a new formulation: "A resident or person who has an interest in an Area, and who is a citizen". The effect is to standardise eligibility around two criteria only, which are local connection and citizenship, while eliminating the Director's open-ended approval power.

**Permanent Residents' Eligibility**

Finally, Section 9 of the 2026 Amendment Act contains the saving provisions, which preserve the position of a permanent resident who had already been appointed as a member of a Rukun Tetangga Area Committee immediately before the commencement of the Act, allowing that person to continue until the appointment is revoked or expires. It also preserves the position of a non-citizen whose membership in a Voluntary Patrolling Scheme had already been approved immediately before commencement, allowing that person to continue until membership is terminated. These saving clauses are important because they confirm that the citizenship-based tightening introduced by the Amendment is principally prospective rather than retroactively invalidating all existing appointments and memberships.

**Wage Requirement**

Section 8 of the 2026 Amendment Act amends subsection 23(2) of the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 by deleting the words "or an employee not falling within the definition of that Act or that Ordinance whose wages per month exceed two thousand five hundred ringgit but do not exceed five thousand ringgit." In the original provision in the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012, questions concerning loss of remuneration were not limited to employees falling within the statutory labour definitions; they also extended to a wage-based category of employees outside those definitions. The 2026 Amendment Act removes that supplementary wage bracket. Mahari and Azmi (2025) support this general understanding by stating that references to employees performing duties under the scheme were updated in line with the Employment Act 1955, the Sabah Labour Ordinance, and the Sarawak Labour Ordinance.

## THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2026 AMENDMENT ACT

The governance theory supports Bowles and Gintis's (2001) contention that well-designed institutions can make communities, states, and markets complement rather than substitutes, and that community governance works best where trust, local knowledge, repeated interaction, and norm-based accountability matter. In this way, the 2026 Amendment Act seeks to preserve Rukun Tetangga's community dimension while organising its interface with state administration. The Act retains the community-based nature of Rukun Tetangga, relying on residents and those with genuine ties to the region, while maintaining the active role of the region Committee and the Voluntary Patrolling Scheme. The 2026 Amendment promotes structured community governance rather than retreating from it.

The 2026 Amendment Act can also be examined through the theoretical perspective of community governance, with community participation as a key component. Community governance concerns local participation, authority structures, decision-making, and the relationship between community institutions and the state. Bowles and Gintis (2001) emphasised trust, shared norms, reciprocity, and repeated interaction in helping communities regulate conduct and solve collective problems, while Totikidis et al. (2005) define community governance as stakeholder-led administration and decision-making. These narratives show that the essential question goes beyond abstract involvement to the legal and institutional framework of communal authority.

Community governance theory in Malaysia is based on four interrelated dimensions. First, institutional structuring addresses the institution's legal architecture, including who can be nominated, how authority is allocated, how long an office may be held, and continuity provisions. This dimension is crucial, as the 2026 Amendment Act changes committee eligibility, tenure, reappointment, and the local connection law. Second is participation and representation, which evaluates whether the statutory framework broadens or narrows community leadership and neighbourhood activities. Fraser (2005), Khwaja (2004), and Butterfoss (2006) argue that participation should be measured by influence, access, and meaningfulness, rather than by formal inclusion alone.

Third, social cohesion and community capability. Under section 8 of the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012, the organisation has long been associated with voluntary patrols, neighbourliness, mediation, welfare, safety, and local problem-solving. Thus, the institution is more than a patrol mechanism or an administrative Committee. The legal design influences whether it can sustain community governance's confidence, cooperation, and communal monitoring (Bowles & Gintis, 2001; Bennett et al., 2008). Fourth is state-community relations. Community governance may lack local sovereignty and operate within state institutions (Murdoch & Abram, 1998). Local governance in Malaysia often combines involvement with administrative control and little decentralisation (Phang, 2011; Hughes et al., 2023). Thus, Rukun Tetangga is a statutory community entity whose powers, makeup, and activities are firmly shaped by official authority. Hence, analysing the 2026 Amendment Act through the four theoretical dimensions would indicate whether it modifies the law and its governance. These dimensions help determine whether the Amendment improves community governance by strengthening institutional clarity, local relevance, and organisational continuity, or by consolidating a more closely managed, administratively overseen model of community involvement.

## LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2026 AMENDMENT ACT

The 2026 Amendment Act is brief, but its legal impact is significant: it does not repeal the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012; rather, it recalibrates several key provisions, including eligibility, committee composition, tenure, leadership continuity, and citizenship requirements for participation. It does not change the Rukun Tetangga Area Committee's general duties under section 8 of the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012. Instead, it focuses on governance rules that concern who may be considered sufficiently related to a region, who can serve on committees, who can engage in the Voluntary Patrolling Scheme, how long committee members can serve, and how appointments can be withdrawn or resigned. In that respect, the 2026 Amendment represents a targeted governance change rather than an overhaul of the Rukun Tetangga system.

The 2026 Amendment Act affects the law, but the question arises: what kind of change does it produce? The Amendment improves community governance by clarifying eligibility, regularising leadership tenure, and tightening laws governing committee service and voluntary patrolling. The same requirements enhance administrative control by reducing inclusion, sustaining hierarchical supervision, and reinforcing a model in

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which community institutions are carefully organised by state authority rather than democratically empowered from below, which makes this tension important.

One could argue that the 2026 Amendment Act strengthens community governance institutionally by, first, clarifying the revised definition of "person who has an interest" and better reflecting modern local connections. The definition of community life has expanded to include labour, property ownership, organisation, and family. By acknowledging these connections, the legal changes may harmonise the statutory structure with the social reality that local belonging is more complex than formal domicile. Second, eliminating unclear residual categories such as "other persons" and administrative discretionary approvals minimises arbitrariness and clarifies the institution's territorial ties to the population it serves. Third, increasing committee tenure from 2 to 3 years may promote leadership continuity and local program sustainability (Ministry of National Unity Malaysia, 2026; Bernama, 2026). The authors contend that this change is interpreted as an improvement in Rukun Tetangga's institutional stability, coherence, and predictability as a neighbourhood government system.

That optimistic reading is insufficient without addressing the Amendment's exclusions, where the citizenship filters are the most evident restrictions. Even if non-citizens or permanent residents have long-term residence, employment, family relationships, or other meaningful ties to the Area, future involvement in committees and patrols is now more restricted to citizens (Ministry of National Unity Malaysia, 2026). The saving clause temporarily protects current permanent resident committee members and non-citizen patrol members because they were legitimately included before commencement. For future involvement, the law narrows. The 2026 Amendment Act strengthens governance by clarifying valid membership and by redrawing the legal boundaries of belonging in an exclusionary direction. The community administration often relies on insider-outsider differences that may be institutionally useful but normatively problematic (Bowles & Gintis, 2001).

The exclusionary effect is a cause for concern because democratic community government goes beyond orderly management. Community administration requires legitimacy, responsibility, and real public control over local conditions, and democratic elections and direct accountability produce authority and diminish alienation (Somerville, 2005). However, the 2026 Amendment Act does not democratise Rukun Tetangga in that stronger sense. It does not establish elected committees, participatory rights, or resident control over officeholders. Instead, Directors and the Director-General retain the authority to appoint and revoke. The Director-General oversees area designation and revocation, committee funding, and the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012's formal consent for committee fundraising. The Minister can create and dissolve the Coordinating and Advisory Committee. The Act may make the institution more orderly, but it does not significantly shift the power from the administrative centre to the community. The 2026 Amendment Act clarifies the scope of the principal 2012 Act, which is relevant to this article because it extends Rukun Tetangga beyond local patrols. A local governance entity that provides cohesive welfare, mediation, and community regulation is amended. This situation suggests that the 2026 Amendment Act alters patrols, as well as participation, leadership, and membership, within a broader statutory framework for community governance (JPNIN, 2026; Ministry of National Unity, 2026).

## POLICY IMPLICATION: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE OR DEEPENING ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL?

The 2026 Amendment Act further clarifies the Malaysian local governance scenario. Phang and Goh (2011) characterise Malaysian local government as functioning within a central–state–local framework, where local governance is officially a state concern yet is significantly influenced by federal policy and legal authority. Their analysis indicates that although some administrative decentralisation has occurred, subsequent developments have shown a trend toward re-centralisation, particularly in the contexts where political conflicts influence interstate interactions. In this interpretation, the 2026 Amendment can be perceived not as a definitive step towards local democratic autonomy, but rather as an initiative to enhance the efficacy of community-level organisations while maintaining their integration within a framework of superior administrative oversight.

Murdoch and Abram's (1998) caution about community governance's limits applies here, where they suggest that the shift from government to governance may allow for cooperation and local involvement while maintaining a central strategy line that overrides local desires in key areas. The 2026 Amendment Act follows that pattern, broadening the concept of "person who has an interest" to include local connections but narrowing

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the state's candidate pool for future Committee and patrol organisations. It regularises leadership tenure but retains state administrative approval and reappointment power. The result is actual community governance, but the community may only organise and participate under state supervision.

Similarly, Fraser (2005) describes the same tension that underlies the idea that community engagement is constantly linked to power, inclusion, and resource allocation and may marginalise underrepresented groups. That conflict applies well in Malaysia. The 2026 Amendment Act may promote internal order and leadership continuity, but it does not appreciably expand the social foundation of decision-making or bottom-up control. Instead, it favours a tighter, administratively legible communal vision, which may be supported by legal certainty and public order. It also shows that the Amendment Act priorities controlled institutional rationalisation over radical empowerment. However, it would be unfair to say that the modification only tightens administrative oversight. A truer assessment is that the 2026 Amendment Act improves administrative-institutional community governance, not democratic or participatory governance. Legal certainty, local relevance, committee continuity, and structure are improved. Genuine governance gains. However, those increases are achieved largely through stricter state oversight, restricted citizenship-based inclusion, and no meaningful improvement in community self-government. The 2026 Amendment does not make Rukun Tetangga a grassroots democracy. It modernises and stabilises Rukun Tetangga as a state-run model of community governance, a significant reform, albeit limited.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2026 AMENDMENT ACT

### Membership, representation and inclusivity

Under the Malaysian model of community governance, which is guided-participation or State-guided civic engagement, only Malaysian citizens can now serve on local committees. However, as the definition of 'residents' has been expanded to include property owners, business operators, employees, and family members, Local Committees (LCs) must actively engage a broader pool of stakeholders while ensuring youth, women, and minority representation in leadership roles. Consequently, membership rules are more formalised, requiring registration and compliance with ministerial guidelines.

### Governance and Tenure

Referring to the above-mentioned Section 4 of the Amendment Act. Committee members can only serve three-year terms and are restricted to two consecutive terms. Such a tenure suggests that regular leadership turnover requires succession planning, training of new members, and continuity mechanisms for ongoing projects.

### Digital Platforms

Similar to Singapore's digital integration or e-governance model, LCs in Malaysia are expected to maintain official WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, or community applications. Hence, daily communication is shifting online, with announcements, polls, and dispute mediation occurring there, thereby enhancing transparency and accessibility.

### Expanded Functions

With communication migrating online, LCs would need to organise digital literacy workshops, sustainability projects, and multicultural integration programs beyond neighbourhood watch and safety patrols. It is expected that LCs' activity calendars will diversify to include recycling drives, coding classes, and cultural festivals, which may become routine alongside traditional neighbourhood watch duties.

### Collaborations with Local Authorities

LCs now have clearer statutory powers to collaborate with local councils and law enforcement, particularly in community development, community safety and dispute resolution. As such, safety patrols and dispute resolution will gain legitimacy, with clearer escalation pathways to official authorities.

**Accountability**

Annual reports to the Director General of National Unity are required and stricter than before, with annual performance reviews. The Ministry of National Unity is the centralised oversight body for the LCs.

# CONCLUSION

The above analysis of the reforms brought by the Rukun Tetangga (Amendment) Act demonstrates that several implications arise across theoretical, legal, policy, and practical/operational aspects. However, the Rukun Tetangga (Amendment) Act 2026 aims to recalibrate the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012's community governance rules. It does not expand Rukun Tetangga's substantive functions, but it regulates who can participate, lead, serve, and how committee and Voluntary Patrolling Scheme memberships are constituted. The change expands legal acknowledgement of connection to a place beyond residence alone, but it also narrows involvement in critical areas by requiring citizenship and removing open-ended approval categories. Thus, the Act improves legal clarity, administrative order, and leadership continuity while making the framework more selective and less discretionary in representation.

The 2026 Amendment Act should be perceived not solely as a technical modification but as an integral component of the broader institutional evolution of Rukun Tetangga in Malaysia. Established in 1975 as a neighbourhood security initiative amid national instability, Rukun Tetangga has transformed into a formal grassroots institution linked to social cohesion, welfare, mediation, local safety, and community coordination, ultimately being formalised under the Rukun Tetangga Act 2012 as a statutory framework for committee governance, voluntary patrolling, and expanded community functions. In this context, the 2026 Amendment Act enhances community governance in a restricted yet significant institutional manner. The authors argue that the 2026 Amendment appears to enhance legal certainty, organisational continuity, and administrative coherence within the Rukun Tetangga framework by defining "person who has an interest" in a specific area, tightening administrative laxity in committee and patrol membership, extending committee tenure from two to three years, and formalising reappointment and resignation processes.

However, the legal modification does not enhance community government in a more democratic or participatory manner. Effective community governance necessitates legitimacy, accountability, and substantial community influence over communal affairs (Somerville, 2005). The Amendment maintains a state-controlled framework in which appointment, revocation, and institutional oversight are centralised under the Director and the Director-General. The explicit citizenship criteria and the practical restrictions on new permanent residents' participation in committees, as well as on non-citizens' participation in voluntary patrols, further constrict the parameters of inclusion. The change does not convert Rukun Tetangga into a more independent model of communal self-governance. Instead, it modernises and stabilises Rukun Tetangga as a state-structured neighbourhood organisation, enhancing community governance chiefly in managerial and institutional contexts rather than in a truly participatory or emancipatory manner.

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