

PAS and new politics ; PAS has seen a reassertion of leadership by religious scholars. What does this mean for Malaysian politics?

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IN 2005, Mr Nasharuddin Mat Isa (picture) was the emerging leader in PAS who was to bridge the two worlds of Malaysia's Islamist party — the ulama (religious scholars) and the professionals.

A Jordan-trained English-speaking cleric and law lecturer who also studied in Britain, he was at ease in both identities.

Fully behind his rise was the growing group of technocrats and professionals — including vice-President Husam Musa and Secretary-General Kamaruddin Jaafar. They helped build Mr Nasharuddin's image as a "professional ulama", seeing him as someone who would advance their reformist agenda.

That symbiotic relationship between the ulama class and the reformists now appears to be loosening. Mr Nasharuddin gradually leaned closer towards the ulama group and led an initiative to forge ties with the ruling United Malays National Organisation (Umno) in the name of solidarity of the Muslim ummah, despite years of rivalry.

Concerned about possible damage to PAS credibility in the eyes of its opposition partners in the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) alliance and the public, Mr Husam challenged Mr Nasharuddin for the deputy presidency in party elections at the just-concluded muktamar or general assembly.

Mr Nasharuddin however successfully staved off the contest, backed by the party's senior ulama. In so doing, the clerics reasserted their traditional kepemimpinan ulama — "leadership by the ulama". The delegates however prevented total control by the clerics by giving half of the seats in the new leadership to the non-ulama, mainly the professionals. So what does this mean for the future of PAS and the changing landscape in Malaysian politics?

Arresting the rise of the professionals

Mr Nasharuddin was supposed to symbolise the rise of the professionals in PAS. The professionals' growing influence has been received with some uncertainty by the clerics, although they were not anti-change. This was, after all, an Islamist party that prided itself in the leadership of the religious scholars since it ditched its assabiyah (religious-nationalist) orientation in the 1980s.

The ulama knew that they could do with this more progressive and urbane group of professionals to reach out to an increasingly demanding electorate — so long as the ulama's leadership remains unquestioned.

Indeed, it has been a winning combination. With the ulama providing the party's religious charisma, and the professionals the organising and strategising skills, the Islamist party scored unprecedented success in the 2008 general election, breaking into the political consciousness of the Chinese and Indian minorities.

Eager to adapt to what is now known as "new politics" — the politics of multiracialism — PAS gradually transitioned itself towards a new image. It now sees its future tied

increasingly to a wider electorate that includes not just Malays but also Chinese, Indians and other non-Muslims — a “PAS for all”. Its new ambition is to be the leading party by the next general election. Should that happen, a new political calculus would be inevitable.

But the evolution, also means a wrenching dilemma. How far should PAS reconcile its Islamic roots with the new demands of multiracial politics? How can the Islamist party accommodate the growing interest of non-Muslim supporters in PAS — without diluting its Islamic identity?

The fear of deformation

The fear that its Islamist identity could be “deformed” — in the words of one party leader, Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad — by the changing politics drove a faction led by Mr Nasharuddin to establish direct links with Umno in “unity talks”.

This search to balance its growing ties with the PR alliance partners — the secularist Democratic Action Party (DAP) and multiracial Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) — proved highly controversial and divisive, provoking the current tension within PAS.

The reformists and professionals simply could not put their faith in Umno, seeing a better future with the PR coalition to restructure Malaysian politics.

In challenging Mr Nasharuddin, Mr Husam and the reformists were alerting the ulama to the danger of sending mixed signals and undermining the growing trust with the non-Muslim electorate who have voted for PAS.

Thrown on the defensive, the ulama fought back by drawing on their institutional charisma as the party’s religious elders. It proved to be still potent, though the professionals managed to recover some ground.

Road Ahead for PAS under the ulama

While the PAS party elections may have seen the reassertion of the ulama’s leadership, this does not necessarily mean a rollback of the influence of the reformists and professionals.

The big question is whether the reassertion of the ulama will reverse PAS’ ground-breaking transformation into a party that appeals to all races. Will PAS post-muktamar lead to a break-up of the PR opposition coalition? Will a new Malay-Muslim political constellation between PAS and Umno emerge, and if so, how will this affect the other communities?

Though it cannot be totally ruled out, we are unlikely to see the return of the old PAS — an inward-looking party that turns only to the Malay and Muslim heartland. The ulama leadership would have fathomed by now the crucial need for PAS to continue embracing the other racial and religious communities. That would mean a continued partnership with the professionals.

Going by what Mr Nasharuddin declared at the assembly’s end, the ulama will push for a closing of ranks with the non-ulama, especially the professionals. He talked about a “collective leadership” between the ulama and the professionals.

Just as significantly, he dismissed in no uncertain terms that PAS would form a unity government with Umno, or sacrifice its partnership in the PR coalition — although engagement with Umno through talks would go on.

PAS leading the Change?

Despite providing the mantle of leadership, the ulama have little choice if they are serious about fulfilling the muktamar's theme of "Islam leading the change" through its universalist message of social justice. The ulama are not in the majority in the party. That majority is formed by the non-ulama — the professionals and activists — who will be the drivers of change. The ranks of the professionals will also grow over time. And PAS professionals are mostly "home-grown" — members who are well-educated in the various fields of modern knowledge.

In other words, PAS has over the years already been evolving from a kampung or village party into an Islam-based contemporary political machine. Indeed, the muktamar symbolically launched PAS into its next phase with an impressive international convention centre project as its new headquarters in Putrajaya. It symbolises PAS' higher ambition of moving closer to the seat of power. Such a lofty goal however would require the ulama to demonstrate effective, not just symbolic, leadership in the new political landscape which the professionals are more at home with.

The ulama leadership have three years before the next general election to prove they are equal to the task of winning the hearts and minds of the non-Muslim electorate. In the longer term, their bigger challenge is to produce a generation of younger and more politically savvy ulama, headed by a suitable successor to president Hadi Awang to provide forward-looking leadership to a new PAS.

That may or may not be Mr Nasharuddin.