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THE 49TH PAS CONGRESS: Politics behind the rhetoric

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The 49th Congress (Muktamar) of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) held in mid-September 2003 confirmed Trengganu Mentri Besar and cleric Abdul Hadi Awang as party president and elected another ulama, Hasan Shukri as Deputy President. In the first election for the post in 20 years Ustaz Hasan easily defeated lawyer and Deputy Mentri Besar of Trengganu Mustapha Ali, who remained a Vice-president. Thus the new leadership confirmed the entrenched dominance of the clerics and ulamas in the PAS hierarchy notwithstanding the recent entry of young professionals into the party. Not surprisingly the PAS leaders couched their appeal in religious terms, which they were confident would enhance the party's legitimacy and help it make further gains in the next general election due next year.

In the 1999 general election PAS won a record 27 parliamentary seats from the ruling UMNO/BN coalition and swept to power in Trengganu in addition to Kelantan. This had prompted the international media to warn of the spectre of an Islamic fundamentalism and the rise of an anti-western Islamic state ala Iran in Malaysia. The Malaysian mainstream media has amplified the warnings made by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed and other UMNO leaders about the consequences of the *hudud* laws that PAS sought to introduce in the states under its control.

For their part UMNO leaders at their annual general assembly in July also sharpened their rhetoric in religious terms. Central to Dr Mahathir's denunciation of PAS was the "unIslamic" character of PAS and its manipulation of religion. Equally noteworthy was the poetic eloquence of his deputy Abdullah Badawi, who unveiled his literary and religious grounding in a poem called "The Peace Within." UMNO's deputy president took the opportunity to remind PAS that the "posts and the positions, the influence and support that you wield, are given as a test from God."

The PAS President Hadi Awang joined the acrimonious battle with UMNO with statements such as "they are planning to deny us victory but Allah is with us as long as we uphold Islam" and "our mission is not to win, our mission is to save souls." These statements portend a battle royal in the buildup to the 11th general elections, one which will involve an all out struggle not just for hearts and minds but also the very souls of the Malay-Muslims of Malaysia.

Politics the name of the PAS game

Shorn of poetic polemics and melodramatic hype both UMNO and PAS are essentially engaged in an instrumental struggle for power, influence and votes. It is a political game and as with all politics, contestants must be prepared to look beyond their rhetoric and engage in representation, compromise and coalition-building. Behind the rhetorical devices employed by the PAS leadership what transpired at the PAS Muktamar clearly signalled that the self-professed Islamic party was in fact an archetypical political party preparing to engage in a battle for the here and now.

The PAS leadership made plain their ambitions; they publicly expressed their confidence that they

would retain the state assemblies of Trengganu and Kelantan. Many expressed their belief that Kedah would be next to fall and that a significant dent could be made in Johor, the bastion of UMNO support. Although party president Hadi Awang insisted that PAS would continue with its aim to establish an Islamic state governed by *hudud*, he also reiterated that should the opposition coalition win the parliamentary election and control the federal government, it would implement the Barisan Alternatif manifesto while PAS-controlled states would be governed by a separate manifesto of PAS.

The election of the PAS deputy president had symbolic significance in two aspects. Although the victory of former Selangor state commissioner Hasan Shukri over Trengganu's Mustapha Ali was viewed as reinforcing the clerical leadership of the party, a closer look suggests a different explanation for the outcome. First, Mustapha Ali himself was a reluctant candidate. Though not an Ulama himself, Mustapha subscribed fully to PAS policy of "rule by Ulama" (the Majlis Shura Ulama or the Religious Scholars' Consultative Council) is the highest authority in the party.) In fact in the early 1980s Mustapha, as PAS Youth Chief, had stoutly championed the need for Ulama leadership of the party.

Second, the fact that the party accepted Mustapha's final decision to contest (indeed, he was a favourite according to some reports) indicated that the party itself had become more receptive to the prospect of a rumi (non-Ulama) member among the topmost leaders. This development is even more striking given that all candidates (initially 14 nominated by the divisions) had been gathered for a private caucus on 4 Sept with PAS' spiritual leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat and party president Hadi Awang and discouraged from having an open contest.

Finally Mustapha's failure to win the election for deputy president could well be associated less with the party's commitment to Ulama leadership than a concern for the maintenance of the party's overall image as a pan-Malaysian political organization. While Kelantan has been the traditional stronghold of PAS Trengganu-based members have formed the bulk of the party's numerical strength and leadership. **Dewan Ulama chief Harun Taib** and Muslimat (Women) head Fatimah Zainab Ibrahim are from Trengganu (indeed they are husband and wife); as are Vice-president Mustapha Ali and president Hadi Awang. Given its national ambitions having the two senior-most party posts in Trengganu's hands might well work to the party's disadvantage.

Conclusion

To be sure the UMNO-PAS struggle is a complex and multiple-layered one. To reduce this contest to a struggle for the souls of Malay-Muslims, as the international media are wont to do, would obscure the underlying motivations involved. For at the end of the day PAS is essentially a political party and its success or failure at the forthcoming general elections will be determined not so much by its command of the discourse of Islam but by its ability to remain grounded in political realities; it has to relate religious rhetoric to pragmatic compromises, to build and sustain coalitions and formulate and implement policies directed at the wellbeing of the Malaysian people and the protection of the national interest. Something which UMNO leaders maintain PAS is ill-equipped to do.

It is recalled that in the one election in Malaysia's history where PAS was unwavering in its commitment to a fundamentalist and radical election agenda, in 1986, when Hadi Awang and then president Yusof Rawa declared *jihad* against the '*kafir*' government of UMNO, they were annihilated in the parliamentary contests and won only 15 state seats. Of course the conditions were different then. In 1986 UMNO had the Islamic political leader Anwar Ibrahim in its ranks. Significantly the forthcoming elections will see UMNO led by Abdullah Badawi, who has impeccable religious credentials. The coming election will see two Malay parties with new leaderships contesting for the votes of a Malay-Muslim population that will be less swayed by religious rhetoric than by practical issues of justice, socio-economic wellbeing and political legitimacy.

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