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THE REMAKING OF PAS: IS THERE AN ANWAR HAND?

Yang Razali Kassim*

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IN 2002, the Malaysian commentator Farish Noor assessed the future directions of the Islamic opposition party, PAS, and concluded that it remained the most interesting party in Malaysia to be studied. PAS, to him, seemed like “a living example of political Darwinism at work”. By this he meant the capacity of the Islamic party to change and adapt to its political milieu for long-term survival.

Survival Politics

PAS’ Darwinian instincts were amply demonstrated at the party’s 51st *Muktamar* or general assembly in June which saw ground-breaking leadership elections. The 2-5 June event turned out to be one of the most important junctures in the party’s history as PAS embarked on a metamorphosis of sorts. Realising the cost of its militant rhetoric post-Sept 11, PAS “reinvented” itself to shake off its perceived image as a party inclined towards militancy. A new approach to politics would be pursued to cultivate an image of moderation - which PAS claimed is its true identity.

Its Islamic State agenda would be de-emphasised, though not abandoned, to narrow the gap with the non-Muslim constituency. PAS would project a more universal platform by using the language of justice, democracy, human rights and good governance. The long-term objective is to transform PAS from a fringe party into a mainstream player that will appeal to Malaysians regardless of race and religion. It will stop acting like a party that is relevant only to the east coast. Its higher ambition now is to become a national party. In the words of its new secretary-general Kamarudin Jaafar, PAS will move increasingly to the middle ground to be “a *Malaysian* political party with its Islamic principles intact” – with the emphasis on the word “*Malaysian*”. The neo-conservative American commentator Daniel Pipes, no friend of Islamists, has described such efforts to re-brand the public image of Islamic parties as “stealth Islamicism” as the core beliefs and outlook remain but a gentler image is conveyed to the wider population. Such a dismissive view however may not be helpful in understanding the complex developments in what is sometimes referred to as the world of “political Islam”.

Rise of the professionals

It is significant that PAS’ reinventing exercise was led and endorsed by key figures often portrayed by the media as conservative and traditional, such as party president Hadi Awang and party spiritual leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who is also chief minister of PAS-ruled Kelantan. The agenda for change received overwhelming backing from the members. In other words, PAS has conceded that there was no other way to stay relevant in a multiracial and

multi-religious society unless it could reconcile the party's quest for an Islamic society – as opposed to an Islamic state -- with the sentiments of the non-Muslim minorities who have to be won over. And to show that they meant business, the members shook up the leadership by recalibrating the balance of power between the ulama or cleric class and the professionals to give the latter group a greater voice.

While it is true that the ulama class lost some ground, it would be wrong to conclude that they had been eclipsed or thrown out. Indeed, it is more appropriate to say that the balance has now been fine-tuned to give the professionals a greater standing. Three names are especially symbolic of the rising influence of the professionals - Nasharudin Mat Isa, the new deputy president; Husam Musa, a newly-elected vice-president and potential successor to Nik Aziz as Kelantan chief minister; and Kamarudin Jaafar, the new secretary-general who took over the post vacated by Nasharudin.

Nasharudin's rise is particularly reflective of the mood for change. He is well accepted by both the ulama class and the professionals, the two key constituencies in the party. Educated in the Middle East and Britain, he is a young cleric who is at home in English, Arabic and Malay and will be the public face of the ulamas to the non-Muslim constituency. Taking a big risk, he ran successfully against the seasoned but unpopular ulama, Hassan Shukri, for the No 2 post. Nasharudin won because of his image as a 'liberal' ulama. Indeed, among the changes that he will be pushing for is the opening up of PAS to non-Muslim membership – something that the party had agonized over in the past.

PAS seems serious about its own reinvention, although how far it can be sustained remains to be seen. Members have even been told to stop resorting to takfir – the politics of branding UMNO members kafir or infidels. At the muktamar, the PAS leadership had been openly criticized for failing to defend the significant gains achieved at the 1999 general elections on the back of the Anwar saga of 1998. In the general elections of 2004, PAS not only lost many seats captured in 1999 but also Trengganu, one of the two states it controlled. But if its goal is to revive the party's fortunes at the next general election, which must be called by 2008, PAS would need more than just a face-lift.

Anwar Ibrahim's role

One man who has been advising PAS leaders to rethink its politics is Anwar Ibrahim. His message: fight a political battle within the realities of Malaysia's plural and multi-religious milieu. Since his release from jail last year, the former deputy premier has been wooed by PAS with an offer of the party's leadership. There is no doubt that PAS needs a figure like Anwar to recover its lost ground. But Anwar has made it clear to PAS that the Islamic state has never been on his agenda. Anwar's statement is hugely significant because it draws for the first time a clear line between him and a party that at one time was widely viewed as his for the taking. It is therefore not surprising at all that Hadi Awang has now also openly invited Anwar to be leader of the Barisan Alternatif (BA), the opposition coalition of which PAS is a major player.

Anwar's distancing from PAS' Islamic state agenda would make it easier for him to bridge the divide between PAS and the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), which left the BA in protest over PAS' declared intent to set up an Islamic state. Bridging the PAS-DAP divide is crucial for rebuilding the BA coalition as a broader opposition front that also includes the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party) led by Anwar's wife.

Hadi Awang's de-emphasis of the Islamic State therefore suggests a willingness to meet the DAP halfway in this larger goal, this time hopefully with a freed Anwar as its leader and unifier. If Anwar could hold the BA together, the opposition front could be a serious challenger to the supremacy of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN). The question is whether PAS and the DAP could ever work together, even with Anwar as their link. A bigger question is whether Anwar would want to play the role of leader of the opposition – should circumstances be such as to rule out any return to UMNO, the ruling party which he once was supposed to inherit.

The road ahead

All things considered, PAS' remaking exercise should not to be trifled with. It is more than just an image switch; it could be the harbinger of bigger things to come. It may be the first step to a long term bid that could shake up the political landscape. Interestingly, the strategic shift by PAS bears striking similarities to the approach taken by Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) in Indonesia that has resulted in PKS' significant inroads into the political support enjoyed by the established parties in Indonesia.

Anwar's indirect role in PAS' repositioning exercise is also significant. Is he laying the groundwork for his own future as a political leader outside UMNO? Perhaps, or perhaps not. But if he does end up leading the opposition front, PAS' remaking exercise of June 2005 will go down in history as having made this transformation possible.

* Yang Razali Kassim is a Senior Fellow with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.