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Prospects for Reform in PAS

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THE current spat between Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and his predecessor Mahathir Mohamad is being closely watched by the leadership circles of PAS, Malaysia's Islamic opposition party. Given the stress it is placing on the unity of the dominant party, UMNO, and the tactical options it offers to PAS, this ongoing crisis might be the harbinger of a welcome change for PAS fortunes. The Islamic party has been on a decline since its dismal performance at the 2004 General Election. PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang declared during the recently-concluded party General Assembly that while the party was not taking sides, it was prepared to provide Mahathir a platform to air his grievances.

Tellingly, Abdul Hadi followed this remark by elaborating on how PAS had previously worked with Mahathir when the latter was prime minister. To be sure, there are major differences within PAS as to whether collaboration with Mahathir is prudent. While some among PAS' ulama leadership appear prepared to set aside past differences to consider cooperation, the party's increasingly influential reformist elements, most of whom joined PAS at the height of the anti-Mahathir *Reformasi* campaign in the late 1990s, were equally vocal in their refusal to support Mahathir.

Differences between the conservative leadership and the reformists over this issue point to tectonic forces that have been percolating beneath the veneer of unity in the Islamic party.

Conservative-Reformist Tension

Since the 1999 General Election, when PAS won a credible 27 parliamentary seats along with the state governments of Terengganu and Kelantan, pro-Anwar supporters have swelled the ranks of the party, particularly its youth wing led today by the savvy and articulate Salahuddin Ayub. While leadership of the party remained in the hands of ulama conservatives who controlled the *Majlis Shura* (Consultative Council) and the *Dewan Ulama* (Assembly of Religious Elders), reformists began asserting their presence in the party's Central Executive Committee, which gradually came under their influence. Against this backdrop, it would not be long before tension between conservatives and reformists began to emerge.

The earliest signs of fissures within PAS surfaced over the articulation of its blueprint for an Islamic State. Pressured by PAS Youth to present its vision of a progressive and modern Islamic state in the wake of the 1999 successes, the party's leadership initiated a study into the issue, with the objective of formulating an official party position on the content of the

Islamic State that it envisaged for Malaysia. This study, sanctioned by former President Fadhil Noor, was undertaken by a team which comprised Zulkifli Ahmad, the LSE-trained director of the PAS Research Centre, Kamaruddin Jaafar, former speech writer for Anwar Ibrahim, and party vice-president and deputy information chief Husam Musa. The outcome of this study was a draft document on the Islamic State in Malaysia prepared in 2002. Notably however, this document was rejected by the ulama leadership of PAS. A second study was commissioned by Abdul Hadi, who by then had replaced Fadhil Noor as party president after the latter's death in June 2002. This led to the production of another version of an Islamic State document that was eventually publicly released in December 2003, after which it came under heavy criticism from UMNO and various Muslim civil society groups.

Three things are noteworthy about this episode. First, while there was much in common between the two documents, there were also some notable points of departure. In particular, the first document made no mention of *hudud*, the controversial Islamic penal legislation that threatens to polarise Malaysian society every time it is raised. While hardly indicative that its reformist authors opposed *hudud*, this at least suggested an awareness of the explosiveness of the issue. Second, compared to the official document released in December 2003, the earlier version was more conciliatory in its approach to relations with non-Muslims in the Islamic state. Finally, there was much unhappiness among reformists that their draft was rejected by the ulama leadership without proper discussion.

Notwithstanding these tensions, party discipline was observed and differences concealed in preparation for the general election of 2004. Subsequently, it was the ulama leadership that led the PAS campaign and masterminded the party's strategy centred on its Islamic State document. Likewise, the party's disappointing performance -- it lost Terengganu and barely held on to Kelantan -- amplified Malaysians' circumspection towards the ulama leadership. Not surprisingly, calls for further reform were made by leaders (including some ulama) and rank-and-file members during the party's election post-mortem. These calls culminated in the unseating of Ustaz Hassan Shukri from the party deputy presidency by Nasharuddin Mat Isa, a key leader from the reformist camp.

Differences between the conservatives and reformists surfaced yet again at the recent General Assembly over the question of non-Muslim participation in PAS politics. The meeting saw reformists push for the introduction of non-Muslim election candidates while the conservatives were adamant that the "Muslims only" criteria for party membership remained sacrosanct. A compromise proposal for non-Muslim associate membership which will permit them to contest elections under the PAS banner was tabled, and is currently being refined by the Central Executive Committee before it is floated to the *Majlis Shura*.

The Reformist Catch-22

While reformists have undoubtedly begun asserting themselves in PAS, the extent of their influence remains unclear. The Pengkalan Pasir by-election in Kelantan in December 2005 was seen as a litmus test for their popularity. That being the case, their defeat despite a vigorous campaign, which included guest appearances by Anwar Ibrahim at PAS *ceramah* or rallies, was telling of the ambiguity that the electorate felt towards the reformists in PAS. Indeed, the challenges they face are considerable.

The immediate test is the question of how to deal with the ulama leadership in a way that does not threaten their position, yet allows the reformist agenda to gain a foothold. This task

is made all the more challenging by the fact that the ulama still control the reins of the party despite the expanding influence of reformists. Since they took over leadership of the party in 1982, the primacy of the ulama has been all but institutionalised into the PAS decision-making structure. The continued presence of spiritual leaders Nik Aziz Nik Mat and Harun Din, both widely-respected and popular among conservatives as well as reformists, has thus far maintained a balance and kept a lid on the tension within the party. It is unclear though, how the balance might shift if and when they depart the political scene.

The reformists are further confronted with the problem of differentiation; they need to consider how to maintain their relevance and identity in a Malaysian political landscape that sees their agenda of transparency and justice shared by the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), and more tellingly, a younger cohort within UMNO. To that effect, the reformists of PAS may well find themselves in a catch-22 situation. On the one hand, diluting fundamentalist dispositions on the Islamic state and persevering with their reformist measures might cause them to look more and more like either Keadilan or UMNO in future, thereby possibly rendering them irrelevant in the constellation of Malaysian politics. Yet on the other hand, as the results of the 2004 elections demonstrated so conclusively, PAS cannot afford to stand still.

On current evidence, it appears that the reformists will be leading the PAS campaign at the next general election, while the Lebanon crisis has proffered a much-needed rallying point for the party. Even so, until the votes are counted, it remains to be seen if the reformist trend has indeed sunk roots in the party, or is merely an aberration.

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