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THE 53rd PAS CONGRESS: IMPLICATIONS FOR MALAYSIAN POLITICS

*Joseph Chinyong Liow and Mohamad Nawab Mohamad Osman**

6 June 2007

THE RECENTLY held 53rd Muktamar (Congress) of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) was perhaps one of the most tense meetings in the history of the party. While PAS is used to seeing contests for party leadership, this particular meeting was especially heated as it was seen as a litmus test as to whether the current re-branding and re-packaging efforts by the professional group within the party could be sustained, or whether the conservative ulama, until recent times the stalwarts of PAS, would return to prominence in the upper echelons of the party. Against this backdrop, the results were somewhat inconclusive, if not surprising, because it failed to give a clear mandate either to the conservative ulama or the professionals. That said, the results will have an impact both for the party and national politics.

The Election Results

As late as Saturday morning, analysts were anticipating a significant swing back to the party's conservative roots. At the time, these predictions were not without basis. The first indications that a shift might be materializing were when Ustazah Nuridah Salleh and Wan Hasrina Wan Hassan won the positions of Dewan Muslimat (Women's Wing) chief and deputy chief respectively. In polls for Youth Wing posts, nine of the 12 central committee members were won by ulama and Ustaz Nasruddin Tantawi – known to be an ultra-conservative young ulama – won the position of deputy youth chief uncontested.

Results of contests for senior party positions the following day however, painted a murkier picture of trends within the party. On the one hand, in elections for 18 of the party's central executive committee, ulama candidates such as Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man, Idris Ahmad, Abdul Ghani Shamsuddin, and Abu Bakar Chik polled the highest number of votes – indicating they still enjoyed strong backing within the party. Former head of the Dewan Ulama, Ustaz Ahmad Awang, also won the third-highest number of votes for the party vice-presidency. On the other hand, professionals managed secure two of the three party vice-presidencies through Husam Musa and Mohammad Sabu while party Deputy President Ustaz Nasharudin Mat Isa, an ulama who nevertheless is widely seen as a moderate and leader of the professional camp, managed to defend his seat relatively easily from the challenge of Harun Taib, outgoing head of Dewan Ulama.

This equilibrium between the ulama and the professionals that had set into the party was further illustrated in the debates that took place. On the one hand, conservatives had harsh words for the professionals, particularly in relation to the new PAS headquarters recently built in Kuala Lumpur as well as other social-cultural events associated with this segment of the party. Moreover, veiled criticisms of Nasharudin were also made. This was balanced out

on the other hand by the laments of professionals that the ulama needed to make clear their policy and vision for the party and country. Further examples of the division within PAS may also be found in the speeches at the Congress. While the ulama often focused on the hadith and sunna of the Prophet, those made by the professionals made regular references to democracy.

Analysing The Results

The results clearly show that the ulama remain an important group within the party. The fact that Ustaz Ahmad Awang, a conservative and former chairman of the Malaysian Ulama Association (PUM) known for its strong stance on Islamic issues, was voted in is indicative of this importance. Furthermore, the incoming leader of the Dewan Ulama, Ustaz Daud Iraqi, was a recipient of religious training from the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s and is known for his conservative views. Delegates also stressed their support for the ulama leadership by giving the top central committee positions to ulama. The role of the ulama in the party is likely to become more important when the composition of the PAS Youth committee members is considered. Traditionally, leaders of this wing move on to assume weighty positions in the party. Nasharuddin Mat Isa, the deputy chief of the party, was himself a PAS Youth leader.

While an outright win by Harun Taib in the contest for the deputy presidency would have indicated clearly that the majority in PAS are not comfortable with the speed at which the party is opening up to woo voters, the delegates decision to retain the professionals in the top echelon of the party's leadership reflects their belief that the presence of the professionals brings an added, and necessary, dimension to the party. That said, the discernibly large percentage of support received by the ulama, as well as the murmurings along the sidelines of the meeting, speak of a latent discomfort at how the professionals have conducted party affairs. For instance, a delegate from Kedah voiced his concern about the exorbitant cost of the party's new RM8 million headquarters in downtown Kuala Lumpur. For him and many in PAS such big projects are a waste of party resources. Furthermore, some ordinary PAS members also expressed discomfort with the apparent extravagant lifestyles of the professional group. Unlike leaders such as Hadi Awang and Nik Aziz who are known for their austere lifestyles, these professionals are alleged by some in the party rank and file to prefer grander living quarters, business-class travel, and luxury cars – lifestyles that do not sit well with many ordinary members of PAS.

Beyond just the ulama and professional divide, the party delegates have exhibited political maturity by voting for candidates based on performance and the ability to lead. This was exemplified by the voting patterns in the election for the Dewan Muslimat. Part of the reason why the incumbents were ousted is due to the fact that many saw their leadership to be ineffective in increasing either membership of the wing or expanding its role in the party. Personal charisma aside, it was also clear from discussions along the sidelines that the coming general elections weighed heavily on the minds of the party rank-and-file as they assessed the competence of the slate of candidates. In turn, this indicated that, particularly for the positions of party vice-president and deputy president, ability to lead the party to success in the general election was likely a major condition for the choice of leadership.

Impact for Malaysian Politics

In terms of its impact at the national level, several observations can be drawn from the results of the PAS party elections.

First, it is clear that the party will be contesting the forthcoming general election on a

platform that has as its core the standing and credentials of the ulama but with major initiatives likely coming from the professionals. No doubt, the question of how this apparent disjuncture, reinforced by the party election results, can be reconciled is a matter which will preoccupy the new party leadership.

Second, the return of many professionals to senior party positions indicate that the reform agenda of PAS put in place by the late Ustaz Fadzil Noor in the wake of the Reformasi movement of the late 1990s continues to assert significant influence on party thinking about how PAS should position itself in order not only to defend its Northern Malay heartland from the UMNO onslaught but also to make PAS more relevant at the national level.

Finally however, the elections also signals the reluctance of the party to shift too far from its ulama pivot. This, in turn, indicates that as far as PAS is concerned, the terms of reference for its longstanding contest with UMNO for the hearts, minds, and votes of Malaysia's Malay-Muslim electorate is likely to continue to take religious forms.

* *Joseph Chinyong Liow is an Associate Professor and Mohamad Nawab Mohamad Osman is a Research Associate at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.*