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THE NEW PAS: RE-DEFINING THE FUTURE OF ISLAMIST POLITICS

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IF THE trend from the recently-concluded internal elections of Malaysia's PAS holds, the reform drive currently under way in the Islamist party could significantly impact not just its leadership but also more than the future of political Islam, or Islamist politics, in the country. Through secret ballot, the party rank-and-file fortified the ongoing shift away from orthodoxy, while carefully preserving the collective charisma of the ulama class of senior religious scholars. If the last party elections two years ago started this reformist trend with the rise to prominence of the technocrats and professionals, the 53rd *muktamar* or general assembly saw the emergence of a new breed of clerics with a reformist image – the “young ulama”.

The rise of the young ulama in 2007 is reminiscent of the ascendancy of the young ulama of the early 1980s which paved the way for the current ulama leadership in PAS. But contrary to the general perception of their reversing the shift away from conservatism, the emergence of the new generation of young ulama actually reaffirmed the role of the technocratic class as agents of change in the party. This is because the young ulama sit well with both the senior ulama class as well as the technocrats and professionals. In this respect, the young ulama, who now dominate the youth wing, act as a bridge between the senior ulama class and the technocrats/professionals. Their emergence therefore prevents any divisive dualism in the party, which some party leaders were beginning to worry about. Indeed, as PAS' spiritual adviser “Tok Guru” Nik Aziz Nik Mat told the media, the long-term goal of the party is to mould an integrated personality such that in future, an ulama is as much a professional, and a professional an ulama.

Impact of the Young Ulama

Contrary to popular belief, PAS leaders told *RSIS*, the young ulama are welcome by the professionals in the party. Like the professionals who are either Western-trained in secular knowledge or in the Islamic sciences, or both, the new breed of young ulama straddles the ulama class and the technocrats, sharing much in common with both groups. What this means is that the leadership of PAS in the coming years will be a unique blend between the professionals and the young ulama, with the latter group providing the fulcrum of leadership – just as the elder ulama are currently providing that locus. This symbiotic relationship between the young ulama and the professionals will ensure the continuity of the ulama-professionals partnership when the elder ulama, now in the 60s and 70s, completely leave the scene.

An example of the young ulama is Mujahid Yusof Rawa, son of former PAS president Yusof Rawa. Together with his successor Ustaz Fadhil Noor, the late Yusof Rawa ushered in the era of ulama leadership in the early 1980s. Although trained as an ustaz, Yusof Rawa was at home with using the English language. There are signs that this ease with the ways of the world is being continued by his

son Mujahid, who is coupling his PhD studies in Islam with organizational management courses. More significantly, Mujahid is heading the PAS' bureau for national unity, a new unit formed to spearhead the party's outreach to the non-Muslim communities. Indeed, a key feature of the young ulama is their exposure to the plural nature of Malaysian society, given their tendency to mix with people outside the Muslim community. It is a quality that some of them developed when, as student activists, they plugged themselves into student politics and interacted with non-Malay and non-Muslim student leaders in pursuit of common agendas such as democracy, human rights and justice.

The icon of the young ulama group is of course Ustaz Nasharuddin Mat Isa, the re-elected deputy president who wears the suit as easily as he does the *kopiah* or traditional skull cap. His success in defending his position from the challenge by a stalwart from the senior ulama class, Ustaz Harun Taib, confirmed the leadership transformation in PAS that is designed to make it more appealing to a broader constituency while maintaining the party's core identity. A significant but little known fact is that this remoulding of the PAS leadership actually enjoys the full support of the two top ulama leaders – Nik Aziz, who is also chief minister of the PAS-controlled Kelantan state, and party president Abdul Hadi Awang. Why has PAS – one of Asia's longest-surviving Islamist parties -- gone to this extent of remaking itself?

Global Trends and the New PAS

In terms of electoral politics, the immediate goal is political survival. The emergence of this "new PAS" is more than just a rebranding exercise that accompanied the rise of the professional class in the party elections of 2005. This remoulding of the party leadership is partly a response to the aftermath of September 11, which forced PAS into a major rethink of its basic approach to politics in a multi-religious society. Another factor was the sharp electoral reverses it suffered at the hands of UMNO under Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's leadership in 2005. If the 1980s and 1990s were a period of confrontation with UMNO under then premier Mahathir Mohamad, the dawn of the new century demanded a softer image of the global Islamist movement, or more specifically, of political Islam, of which PAS is clearly a part.

Indeed, the mainstreaming of PAS is consistent with the global trend affecting Islamist parties elsewhere. In many parts of the Muslim world, old-style Islamist politics that are exclusivist and focused solely on the Islamic state agenda have given way to new-style inclusionary politics to break the barrier between Islam and the non-Muslim world. The successes of Indonesia's Partai Keadilan Sejahtera or Justice and Prosperity Party (PKS) and Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), for instance, have convinced PAS, especially the professionals and the young ulama, that this is also the way to go for the party. Both the PKS and the AKP emphasise the substance rather than the form of political Islam, leading to a de-emphasis in the Islamic state agenda in favour of universally-shared values such as democracy, human rights and justice. The PKS has even fielded non-Muslim candidates in national elections, specifically in areas with significant non-Muslim populations.

We now see the new PAS emulating the model by similarly toning down the Islamic state agenda and contemplating the fielding on non-Muslim candidates in the next general elections. It was not a flash in the pan that Hadi Awang's presidential address at the 53rd *muktamar* ditched any mention of the Islamic state in favour of the theme "Save Democracy and Uphold Justice". The party has also introduced a PAS Supporters Club comprising ethnic Chinese and Indians. Indeed, new ground was broken when for the first time, the leader of the club, an ethnic Chinese Christian, Hu Pang Chaw, addressed the assembly. The new PAS is slowly but gradually narrowing the ideological gulf with the other opposition parties as they prepare for early general elections. This narrowing gulf has raised the likelihood of an informal pact with Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) but more indirectly with the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) which rejects any pact with PAS for as long as it stresses an Islamic state agenda.

Mainstreaming of Islamist Politics

PAS is clearly positioning to defend its home base in Kelantan where it holds a precarious one-seat majority in the state assembly. The future of Kelantan -- the only Malaysian state ruled by PAS -- as the bastion of Islamist rule in the country, is tenuous, to say the least. Should Kelantan fall into the hands of UMNO at the next general elections, it could force PAS back into the fringe, and into orthodoxy.

The reformist drive in PAS is a barometer of sorts for the mainstreaming of Islamist politics in the region. Whether PAS can survive its latest challenge will determine not just the future of the new PAS but also the future of political parties that are driven by Islam as an ideology but are seeking a role in the national democratic space. Clearly, the ability or otherwise of PAS to come out of this intact will also influence the course of Islamist politics in other parts of the Muslim world.

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