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When Islamists Play By the Rules Yet Change the Game

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The recent upgrading of the PAS Supporters Club to a legal entity, complete with party constitution amendments that recognize the new wing, not only makes the PAS promise of “PAS for all” self-fulfilling, it provides the party an opportunity to lead the change away from race-based politicking.

Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) is an Islamist opposition party that has been consistent in its use of democratic means to pursue its political goals - seeking wider support through elections to gain representation at state and federal levels, denouncing violent political protest, and pushing for change and development through proper channels. Though participation in the Malaysian political environment has shaped the PAS of today, PAS itself has had an impact on the political dynamics in Malaysia. The latest upgrading of the PAS Supporters Club into the PAS Supporters Congress can be read as an experimental departure from communal-based politics, led by PAS, historically a Malay-Muslim party.

From Club to Congress

In the past, whether cooperating with UMNO, or joining the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah and later the Barisan Alternative, PAS has always been more comfortable keeping to its traditional target audience of Malay-Muslims. Power sharing and governing states however has given PAS hands on experience in plural politics. The party appears to have become more pragmatic in its idealism, accepting that groups with interests different from it have a legitimate role in the political process. On the other hand, PAS studiously rejected UMNO's blandishments to join forces to form a Malay unity government in order to uphold Malay dominance (ketuanan Melayu).

The PAS Supporters Club, an initiative of PAS's National Unity Bureau and consisting of non-Muslim members, was created right before the 2004 general elections, to make PAS more acceptable to the non-Muslim electorate. However, the hard-line stance PAS took during the 2004 elections made it difficult for the club to attract its target audience. A post-mortem of the dismal 2004 electoral

performance had PAS undertaking party reform efforts that included going out of its way to engage the non-Muslims. The club has functioned as a platform for non-Muslims especially within PAS governed states to give feedback to the party, as well as to provide opportunities for engagement between PAS members and the non-Muslim community to foster racial unity.

Since reaching out to non-Muslims via talks, workshops, dialogues, official statements, and its PAS Supporters Club, PAS has confidently contested in previously BN strongholds, with a substantial number of non-Muslims voting for it. PAS's moderate message and focus on the substance of Islamic principles rather than Islamic semantics, coupled with its close cooperation with PKR and DAP, may have attracted many protesting against BN. However, bringing down the direct barrier between PAS and the non-Muslims community would have been extremely difficult without PAS Supporters Club members paving the way, and PAS leaders willingly stepping up to share the party's stand on Islamic governance and the place of non-Muslims in such a polity.

The recent launch of the PAS Supporters Congress was an attempt to appeal to more non-Muslims, dispel their fears towards the Islamist party, and to acknowledge the undivided support of existing supporters, especially in assisting the party machinery during the 2008 general election and the subsequent by-elections. According to PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang, the party was serious about appointing non-Muslims to the senate to represent Malaysia's multi-racial society, and was also granting the wing powers to nominate non-Muslim as candidates in the next general elections. He stated that, "PAS is trying to unite the various races by opening its door to the non-Muslims. We reaffirmed our commitment to unity when we decided to upgrade the PAS Supporters Club to being equal to the youth, women and ulama wings."

There are 20,000 registered members made up of Chinese, Indians, Siamese, and Orang Asli, in the supporters' club that have been inducted into the new congress, the number is estimated to double with the more structured congress. The congress's top leadership would be invited to attend central PAS leadership meetings, as well as send representatives to the annual PAS Muktamar (general meeting). Discussions are under way to allow members of the congress to vote in future party elections, which would make them full-fledged PAS members. The current party constitution states that all PAS members must be Muslim. PAS also welcomed any progressive input for the party. As an Islamist party, the accommodations and power offered to non-Muslim PAS Supporters is certainly helping to establish its credentials as a multi-racial party.

Implications of the New PAS Supporters Congress

The Pakatan Rakyat (PR) opposition coalition rejects race-based politics, and aspires to usher in a new political trend based on a multi-racial approach. The launch of the PAS Supporters Congress has shown the potential of the Islamist party to lead such a change. PAS has a solid grassroots network, and though PAS leadership is made up of many voices (e.g. ulama and professionals), in the face of internal conflict, it has been known to close ranks to present a unified front after intense debate. Conversely, as recent times have shown, internal conflicts within PKR (a professed multi-racial party within PR that would have been seen as the driver of such a trend) tend to end in party defections. This indicates that the ability to resolve internal conflicts and manage differences within a party is essential for the stability needed to steer change in the system.

For PAS to successfully drive the change towards more multi-racial politicking would depend largely on how the party deals with disagreements and demands of the new PAS Supporters Congress. Settling the disagreements and demands as it would internal issues, would certainly have a more positive outcome than dealing with them as a threat by outsiders gaining too much influence on the internal affairs of PAS. The party should also keep in mind the reason why most non-Muslims chose to join the club and now the congress – they deem PAS to be multi-racial, open to suggestions and feedback, just and efficient in its governance (albeit with Islam as a guide). To read any gains in non-

Muslim support as acquiescence of a PAS Islamist agenda could well be its undoing.

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