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PAS: Balancing Inclusion and Tradition

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The Islamic Party of Malaysia is reaching out to non-Muslim voters by forming a new wing of non-Muslim supporters, promoting good governance and playing down the Islamic state. However it is also intent on retaining the support of its traditional conservative base.

The 56th annual party convention of the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS) held in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, was, for the first time, officially attended by its non-Muslim supporters. PAS' Spiritual Leader Nik Aziz began his speech by saying, "Ni hao ma?" thereby underlining the party's most distinct trajectory in recent years.

While PAS is an Islamic political organization, with its objective of establishing an Islamic State, it has acquired an increasing sophistication and nuance in its political strategy. "The future is with Pakatan," Nik Aziz said in his opening speech, referring to its Alliance partners PRK and DAP. "Only Malays support UMNO," he added, highlighting PAS' success in gaining the support of the non Malay-Muslim electorate. The recent by-elections, PAS claims, are testament to UMNO's faltering support among the non-Muslims.

PAS Youth Chief Nasruddin Hassan Thantawi, in his speech to the PAS Youth Wing, also emphasized more open relations with the non-Muslims through the recently revamped PAS Supporters' Congress. Further bolstering PAS' confidence in expanding its non-Muslim base, PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang, launched the theme of this years' convention "Islam Adil Untuk Semua," or Islam is Fair for All. He set out PAS' overall approach for the coming years and stressed their commitment to the democratic system, in tandem with their non-Muslims allies.

Prior to the convention, PAS had announced the formation of a new wing named the Dewan Himpunan PAS (PAS Supporters' Congress) in May. The wing provides a membership platform for its non-Muslim supporters, which reportedly numbered some 20,000 members. During its launch, PAS also indicated the possibility of fielding members of the new wing for senatorial appointments and

elections, thus sidestepping its own constitution which did not allow for non-Muslim members.

The establishment of the Supporters' Congress marked the culmination of a series of events which involved religious confrontations in Malaysia e.g the issue of the usage of "Allah" by non-Muslims and the attendant attacks on a number of churches. PAS' argument against the court decision to limit the usage of "Allah" exclusively to Muslims gained favour with the non-Muslims, as did its denunciation of the church attacks.

More recently, the legalization of sports betting by the federal government generated a backlash against the ruling BN coalition. The negative reactions on the ground from a wide range of Malaysian citizens presented a convenient platform for Pakatan – including PAS - to take a definite stance against the government. Reinforcing the well-known prohibition of gambling among Muslims, that stance would have gained the approval of PAS' traditional base of religious conservatives.

Nevertheless stumbling blocks still remain for PAS, especially in attracting more non-Muslims to its cause. One issue that cannot be separated from PAS is the contentious subject of the Islamic State. So far, PAS has shrewdly played down the Islamic State rhetoric since joining the Pakatan alliance while focussing on a more generic goal of a "just and trustworthy governance". When asked about its Islamic State objective, PAS claims that it is not abandoning it but is instead working at increasing the understanding of the people- especially non-Muslims – on the concept, while delicately raising its image in front of selected supporters.

Not to be outdone, UMNO, through BN, is also adopting a similar strategy of building a more inclusive image. PM Najib Tun Razak has sought to tone down UMNO's pro-Malay image and reclaim BN's multi-ethnic support through the 1Malaysia concept and a purposed New Economic Model to overlap the outdated New Economic Policy. Clearly both UMNO and PAS are moving in the same direction, welcoming the ethnic and religious minorities while risking alienating their own conservative bases that have long been divided. Hence the perception of the parties among both these conservative demographics – UMNO's ethnic Malays and PAS' religious supporters- may be acutely sensitive to the way the current issues in Malaysia are being played out. The BN government had to scramble to make a U-turn on the sports betting issue, but only after vehement protests by the opposition. Also while UMNO members have been actively publicised with the pro-Gaza flotilla activists, the latter have been seen lending support to PAS by attending its party convention.

Nevertheless, PAS is still regarded as the most credible opposition to the current government, so much so that PAS has often described itself as the "government-in-waiting". To realise that goal, it must face its single biggest challenge: its own identity. As an Islamic party, it has to carefully tread the ground and balance an image that attracts the religious conservatives against its more inclusive approach towards the non-Muslim electorate in Malaysia.

With more than half a century of experience, PAS seems to be adopting a cautious approach, and able to discern the difference between the crowds that they are addressing. PAS' own members have warned of possible alienation of their conservative Muslim supporters by the new emphasis on non-Muslim electorates. At the same time, PAS leaders also conceded that the ground on which the Muslim support was based, is shaky. They have proposed more frequent inter-religious and inter-ethnic forums and activities to avoid any possible conflict of interests. Of course, it remains to be seen how they actually balance the competing demands of their increasingly diverse voters. PAS faces interesting times ahead.

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