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## 13th Malaysian General Election: Prospects and Challenges for PAS

By Farish A Noor

### **Synopsis**

*The controversy over the use of “Allah” by non-Muslims in Malaysia is one of the many tough issues that PAS has to deal with as a member of the Pakatan Rakyat opposition coalition which seeks to capture power in the coming general election. Can PAS walk the tightrope between political idealism and pragmatism should the opposition run the country?*

### **Commentary**

THE RECENT controversy over the use of “Allah” by Christians in Malaysia has raised questions about its impact on the political strategy of the Islamic party, PAS, in the run-up to the 13th general election expected anytime between now and 28 April this year.

The extensive media coverage of the ‘Allah’ issue in Malaysia was sparked by a speech given by the Democratic Action Party (DAP) leader and Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng during the Christmas celebrations last December. His defence of the use of ‘Allah’ by non-Muslims to denote ‘God’ met with a strong reaction from several quarters who insisted that the word Allah should be reserved for Muslims only. DAP’s ally PAS initially supported Lim’s position but then shifted its stance when its council of religious scholars declared that the word should be restricted to Muslims only.

### **History of PAS’ electoral performance**

This has highlighted, yet again, the deep fissures within the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition and within PAS itself, between the conservative Ulama and the so-called ‘progressives’ who are sometimes also called the ‘Erdogan faction’ of the party. Coming so soon before the upcoming general election, the debate raises the question of how PAS will perform and whether the Islamists will be able to come to power. To answer this question one would have to look at PAS’ electoral performance since it was formed in 1951 and the rise and fall of its appeal over the past six decades.

Since the elections of 1955, PAS’ performance at the polls has been varied: In that year it won one Legislative Assembly seat; in the 1959 parliamentary elections after independence it won 13 seats; in 1964 nine seats; and in 1969 12 seats. After a brief period as member of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition in the 1974 elections, PAS ran on its own again, obtaining five seats in 1978 and 1982 and one in 1986. It won seven seats in 1990 and 1995; then secured 27 seats in 1999; seven in 2004 and 23 seats in 2008.

It can be seen that PAS was strongest in the elections of 1969, 1990, 1995, 1999 and 2008 when it was part of a wider coalition. In 1990 and 1995, it joined the Semangat '46 party as the United Ummah Front and in 2008, it was allied to the PKR and DAP in the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front). Conversely PAS fared miserably in the elections of 1986 (one seat) and 2004 (seven seats) when it ran alone and when its political platform was seen as radical and potentially confrontational.

### **Inevitability of coalition politics?**

Two conclusions can be drawn from the observation of PAS' electoral performance to date: Firstly, PAS cannot possibly come to power at the Federal level unless it is part of a coalition. Even during the party's brief stint in power during the 1970s, it was part of the ruling BN. Given Malaysia's ethnic landscape in which Malays and other Bumiputra ethnic groups make up around 60% of the population, PAS – like other Malaysian parties that have national aspirations – would have to seek multi-party allies as part of a wider alliance.

Also, the nature of the Malaysian electorate, with disparate interests identified along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, makes it virtually impossible for any party to gain power on its own without the support of other ethnic or religious-based parties as allies. This is true for PAS as it is for all the other parties: Even UMNO, which remains the biggest party in the country, is dependent on its coalition allies in the BN.

Secondly, the nature of Malaysia's inter-ethnic bargaining process means that any party with national aspirations will have to cater to the needs and concerns of the Malaysian electorate as a whole, and not antagonise any of the ethnic and religious minorities in the country. As seen in the general elections of the mid-80s, PAS' worst performance was when the party was seen as being too radical and influenced by the rhetoric and tactics of radical Islamist parties worldwide in the wake of the Iranian revolution.

In 2004 PAS performed poorly after its leaders openly came out in support of the Taliban and justified calls for 'jihad' against the West. This suggested that the Malaysian electorate, including the majority Malay-Muslim voters, are not inclined to support any political party that takes a radical approach to politics and articulates a revolutionary course to power. In this respect the Malaysian electorate remains a force of moderation that tempers the rhetoric and ambitions of all the parties in the country.

### **Dilemma of coalition politics**

PAS seems set for now on the course of coalition politics and is unlikely to leave the Pakatan Rakyat coalition at this stage. However, the demands and concerns of the conservative section of the party will have to be addressed while the party's leadership pursues the goal of coming to power as part of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious coalition.

Just how the needs and demands of the conservatives in PAS will be assuaged if PAS comes to power remains an open question. Thorny issues ranging from the enforcement of Islamic rules to moral policing remain for the Pakatan coalition to deal with. Here lies PAS' dilemma: it cannot come to power at the Federal level unless it remains part of a coalition, but it can never achieve its goal of creating an Islamic state as long as it remains in a coalition.

The handling of the 'Allah issue' therefore gives some indication of what sort of coalition politics we can expect from PAS should it come to power as part of a wider coalition. PAS is likely to remain in the current Pakatan coalition as this provides a vehicle to gain power. But remaining in such a coalition will also place a strain on the competing demands and aspirations of both conservatives and progressives in the party.

This is an internal conflict that is not likely to be resolved even if it were to assume control of the Federal government, for there are bound to be demands from its ranks to further pursue the party's original Islamist agenda that has been set since the 1950s. Such demands, however, cannot be placated without incurring the corresponding loss of support from PAS' coalition allies. Therefore compromise will have to remain the operational mode of PAS' day-to-day politics, while the party leadership walks the tightrope between pragmatism and political idealism.

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