

Five promising ideas from PAS' new line-up



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ANALYSIS The victory of the progressives in Malaysia's Islamic party has indeed served to inject greater dynamism into Pakatan Rakyat and strengthen PAS' engagement in national politics.

The party nevertheless faces deep-seated suspicion by many non-Muslims and more secular Malays who see the election of the non-ulama team as a move to gain power than to genuinely move PAS towards the centre and towards the mantra that has guided the party for the last few years 'PAS for All'.

The fact of the matter is that PAS will never appeal to all Malaysians as many reject religious parties and others remain apprehensive about the intolerant messages of PAS leaders in the past on issues of morality especially. Many will remain loyal to the BN and Umno no matter what.



Yet, PAS, like all parties in Malaysia, evolves along with its ideology and strategies. What distinguishes PAS from Umno today is that those willing to engage in reform have taken the party's helm, while in contrast the dialogue and direction from Umno and its Perkasa allies appears to remain locked in a time warp of the racial ideas of the 70s whose time has long past.

The voices of reformers in Umno like Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin have been noticeably silenced. As such, PAS has generated

excitement, as it has taken the lead in shaping the direction of discourse among Malay-dominated parties.

Given the buzz surrounding PAS' new line-up, it is important to delve further into what are the currents shaping its direction. Where exactly is PAS evolving to? What are the new ideas that are emerging among the new leaders and PAS? Are there stumbling blocks that will limit the progressive orientation of the party? Finally, how will these ideas reshape Malaysian politics?

PAS' progressive ideas have the potential to transform Malaysian politics, but they will require much more than the usual talk that has associated with new leaders, and be tied to concrete actions that engender confidence and break down the underlying suspicions about the party's ability to govern tolerantly across communities.

While many of the ideas are in the early articulation, and most lack clear policy implementation mechanisms, the 57th PAS Muktamar does point to five promising ideas that suggest that the party is indeed moving in a genuinely more progressive and inclusive direction.

It is noteworthy that PAS delegates avoided the shallow discussion of race and focused the debate on targeting Umno and strengthening the party, showing an unprecedented discipline and coherence, despite the divisions in the party elections.

In the midst of this focus were snippets of five progressive thinking:

1. Building a welfare state

The party elections buried the main theme of the muktamar, which was building the welfare state - 'negara berkeadilan'. At the core of this concept is the idea of welfare, namely that health, education, shelter and food are basic needs.

Prime Minister Najib Razak is right in that the focus on basic needs has been shared by Umno, at least the Umno of the past. Yet, he misses three important differences in the PAS articulation of this idea. The first is the active voice, the 'berkeadilan'.

Instead of a top-down model in which the state gives benefits, the PAS concept involves the rakyat, giving them a place in shaping the welfare outcomes. This participatory element is quite distinctive in that it moves the policy discussion toward one of inclusion and engagement, rather than of selective recipients and stationary acceptance.

This moves the realm of policy discussion towards one in which the role and inputs of ordinary people in shaping outcomes has increased, and in the process explicitly acknowledges the important role that ordinary Malaysians play in shaping their own welfare and evoking change.



PAS leaders point to the critical role of philanthropy and volunteerism, as they articulate this more active approach to welfare, and highlight the need to empower initiatives and embrace a more active civil society and citizenry.

The move away from a policy of selectively giving handouts and benefits toward one based on engagement and greater synergy between leaders and people is tied to the second difference in this concept - a broader idea of welfare.

PAS leaders are careful to distinguish this idea from the use of the term in the West - where the government picks up all costs of healthcare, provides unemployment benefits and more - recognising that financial limitations in Malaysia inherently limit the scope of welfare benefits.

Yet, they bring in the importance of spiritual well-being in their conception, believing strongly that welfare cannot be secured without an appreciation that welfare is not just about the material benefits of life, but should include an appreciation of psychological factors of dignity, common humanity and shared community and idealism tied to religious faith.

This non-materialistic conception implicitly criticises the focus on consumerism and 'hard'

development that has guided much of Malaysian development policy since the 80s and serves to bridge the discussion between a welfare state and an Islamic state. How exactly it does this is unclear, but the spiritual element and implicitly an appreciation of 'softer' and 'non-tangibles' elements are there.

Finally, PAS continues to point to a focus on the excluded, those left out of the current policy direction of BN, namely the non-elites.

In this articulation of the welfare state, PAS is criticising Umno for continuing to serve only the elite, the handful of contractors who were lucky to win deals. They point to initiatives in Kelantan and Kedah at the state government levels that target the hardcore poor, single mothers and elderly, highlighting the need to expand the social safety net for the vulnerable communities. The idea as articulated is that the state needs to help those who cannot have a fair shake in helping themselves.

What stands out from this discussion is that the focus is on specific groups; it is not a race-based policy that continues to narrowly conceive poverty and development in racial terms.

While PAS leaders do acknowledge that in the states they govern - with perhaps their involvement in Selangor as an exception - the majority who benefit from these policies are Malays, they point out that they are governing in Malay dominant states and emphasise that the focus is on vulnerability, not the colour of the recipients' skin or their religious affiliation.

PAS leaders appear to aim to illustrate that a focus on those in need better targets state resources and promotes welfare broadly; it moves the allocation of state resources from those with access and playing money politics to ordinary people in need and not from the privileged classes.

2. Entrepreneurship and anti-monopolism

Party president Abdul Hadi Awang's speech and the subsequent delegate discussions also pointed to the evolution of a new economic policy, one in which the market place and competition play a greater role.

The ideas here are less formulated, but there are two core elements that emerged. Foremost is the focus on removing the monopolies in the supply-chain in the economy. This idea builds on the discussion of IPPs (independent power producers) that has been in the public realm in the last few months over questions of subsidies.

Opposition politicians from all parties are driving home the point that favouritism in the allocation of contracts to supply goods, from sugar and chicken to water and electricity, underscore the costs of basic goods and contribute to inflation. These often hidden overheads benefit the elite and transfer the burden of their wealth gains to ordinary citizens.



Many of these have been in place for decades, and the lack of transparency and competition

in their allocation continues to increase overheads in the provisions of services and affordability of basic supplies.

These comparatively higher costs from monopolistic allocation places Malaysia's economy at a disadvantage when compared to Thailand and Indonesia, and this disadvantage is borne by ordinary Malaysian businesses and consumers.



It is thus that Hadi Awang called for greater competition, for a fairer marketplace where monopolies of the past do not continue to haunt the present and the country's future.

At first, it may seem strange that PAS is calling for greater market forces. Like all the opposition parties in Malaysia, there is a tension among those who advocate for a checked marketplace and others who call for more market drivers.

Yet, it speaks to the fact that many PAS members and supporters are involved in small businesses that they face the financial constraints from an unfair supply chain daily. It is indeed affecting their bottom line, and squeezing those who are working hard to generate a decent income in a system that is at best skewed.

More and more small and medium businesses are forced to face the reality of a more competitive market, with greater pressures from China and other international markets, and do so without a fair shake.

PAS - as it has evolved to include more urban members and had to promote economic development in states without the same level of credit allocation and support such as in Kelantan - are appreciating the need to make the marketplace fairer through more openness and competition.

The discussions among some PAS leaders suggest that the aim is to instill a different trajectory for entrepreneurship. Rather than have entrepreneurs be 'the chosen ones', those who are assisted are those that prove themselves through competition.

Across communities those engaging in small businesses are facing similar problems such as a lack of access to credit and inadequate supports in marketing, beyond the comparatively higher costs of many inputs.

Among some PAS leaders at least there suggests that there has indeed been a dialogue that points to a different trajectory in moving Malaysia's economy forward, a trajectory not based on transforming the economy through the hiring of expensive consultants closely connected to the large corporations, but one that listens to the everyday struggles of navigating the basic goal of assuring enough rice in the rice bowl.

3. Efficient and fairer governance

While the first two ideas were buried in speeches and the debate at the muktamar, the main theme highlighted was about changing the style of governance. This came most focused from the new deputy president of the party who focused his target on the election machinery.



Mohamed Sabu pointed to the need for more professionalism in the Election Commission over postal voting and the registration of new voters. He also called into question the actions of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), particularly over the Ahmad Sarbani case.

While his focus was on the immediate issues involving elections and serious questions about potential violations of professional ethics, the broader theme was there - the civil service needs to be fairer - across races, across

religions, across communities. The focus was not on the civil service per se, but the broader political environment in which actions are seen to be politically motivated for one side in the political equation.

The zero-sum nature of politics - where the civil service has been seen to work for one side or the other has hurt everyone, especially the civil servants. Political loyalty is prized over professionalism.

Gone - at least in the rhetoric - is the professionalisms and statesmanlike quality of civil servants in the past who were concerned with governing the country for the people in the country, not the politicians. The discussions point to the difficulties in strengthening the institutions that underscore improved governance - too much politicisation on the civil service and the promotions based on loyalty rather than merit.

The discussions in the muktamar floor called for better performance and called bias in performance to task. Yet PAS was unclear on how to build ownership with the civil service in promoting a more inclusive and more capable way of governing. The civil service will always play an important role in the country, and strengthening a system that rewards genuinely national service rather than loyalty is crucial.

The only other governance point that got attention - reminiscent of the early days of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his promised reform agenda - was to promote efficiency, to further reduce red tape and streamline decisions and the implementation of benefits. This was highlighted by leaders in PAS-led states who pointed to improved allocation of scholarships and distribution of elderly benefits.

While there remain considerable areas to improve in policy implementation, what is important to note is that PAS leaders are extremely conscious of the need to strengthen the capacity of the civil service and to work together in policy implementation, while simultaneously not ignoring the challenges of institutional reform.

At least so far, the focus remains on highlighting governance problems, given the charged political contestation between Umno and all other parties, including some in the BN itself, and the perception portrayed by former senior civil servants in groups like Perkasa that the civil service is to serve Umno and only Malays rather than the people at large across the political spectrum and communities.

4. Pluralism

In avoiding the narrowness of the disturbing racialised discourse that has dominated political debates since March 2008 - with many BN national leaders continuing to identify themselves with one community rather than the country as a whole and important concepts such as 1Malaysia being used as a campaign vehicle for one political side rather than as an integrative national framework, PAS leaders both explicitly and implicitly acknowledged one of Malaysia's greatest strengths - its pluralism.

For the PAS delegates, this pluralistic cord was centered around efforts at reaching out to non-Muslims. While the party still has a long way to go in its outreach efforts, the strengthening of the non-Muslim wing has deepened engagement.

It is not a coincidence that the leader who has been arguably the strongest advocate for non-Muslim engagement Mujahid Yusof (*right*) was re-elected to the Central Committee despite strong opposition to his call for non-*ulama* leadership.

The urban cosmopolitanism in contemporary PAS has had an impact, changing its institutional structure and outreach.

The discussion of pluralism extended to the Malay community. Of late, in an effort to win over the Malay community, Umno has harped back to its emphasis on the Malay community as a unified group. Its aim appears clear, to win more Malay support to gain seats, while recognising that its efforts towards other groups



have not yielded results.

At the PAS muktamar, there was clearly more appreciation of the diversity within the Malay community, across class, geography and sectors. This engagement with pluralism within the Malay community reflects the reality of Malaysia. From Sarawak and Sabah to Johor and Kelantan, to the Umnoputras and ordinary taxi drivers, diversity is the norm. Assuming that all of these groups have a shared outlook and experience does a disservice to their needs.

Where PAS however faces its most serious challenge is to appreciate the diversity in religious outlooks among Malays. Many are more secular and would prefer to stay that way. In its outreach effort - to capture the middle ground - it is essential to both acknowledge and respect the right of others to think differently within the Muslim faith.

In many ways, Mat Sabu, who has promoted diversity of theological views in his speeches, provides leadership in this regard. The big issue is changing the rank and file within PAS who continue to adopt a mindset that you must belong to group think to be accepted. Engagement has to come with genuine acceptance of difference. There is clearly more appreciation of pluralism in the evolving PAS, although with limits.

It is also important to note that the ethnic pluralism among the progressives coincides with a greater appreciation of the role of women within the party and Malaysia generally. The voices of progressives are being articulated with the new Muslimat leadership, where the ideas of the welfare state and concerns over fairer governance have dominated the discourse of those recently elected.

5. Nationalism

The final theme that resonated among PAS' new leadership is nationalism. There is clearly a harping back to the past when the party was driven by the nationalistic spirit that underscored Malaysia's independence movement. This element of nation-building, of ethnic integration, of collaboration and spirit of hope is a fundamentally new message.

Media reports - and many personal laments - highlight the negativity and sense of disappointment among Malaysians, whether it involves religion harmony or personal attacks. No question, the discourse of negativity has not served Malaysia well.

PAS' new leaders aim to instill hope and to build a stronger country, not just their own party. Ironically, many of these leaders who grew up in the Mahathir era are taking on the Mahathir nationalist mantle.

What distinguishes PAS' nationalist message is its focus on strengthening the community within Malaysia. Rather than identify a foreign 'enemy' - such as Singapore - PAS leaders point to forging links globally with a stronger collective at home - after all, a unified Malaysia stands tall.

Beyond vision

The ideas among PAS' new leaders are indeed progressive. PAS' new leadership draws its inspiration not just from Turkey - where Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is poised to win a third term in yesterday's national polls - but from the broader transformations taking place across the Muslim world, be in neighbouring Indonesia or Egypt.

But ideas alone are sadly not enough. They need to be translated into concrete initiatives

and policies. Malaysians have had many promises, and now expect their leaders not just to provide fancy powerpoints and snazzy concepts, but to walk the talk. The burden on PAS to move in a progressive direction, one that is genuinely nationalist and inclusive, is heavy.

They will not be able to carry forward their vision without greater support and cooperation with their Pakatan partners. In particular, PAS needs a stronger PKR that moves toward re-engaging the electorate. Pakatan as a whole faces the challenge of offering a different vision than just the mantra of change.

PAS new leaders also continue to face an internal battle within their own party. The conservatives may have suffered a loss at in the party polls, but are fighting hard inside the party to hold onto their positions.



There are two sources of conservatism - one continued to be tied to the narrow approach of the Islamic state - an approach that resulted in the party suffering its worst electoral defeat since independence - losing one state government and over half its seats in 2004 - and the other tied to a non-pluralist vision of the country involving race, the Unity Group, reminiscent of the 70s that led to the other significant historic loss of support for the party.

Both visions - tied to old guards in PAS - are outdated, but they remain powerful ideas within PAS, and still permeate parts of the elected party leadership. PAS' progressives thus face a difficult path ahead. They will not be able to handle it alone, and will need broader engagement from Pakatan and civil society.

Without cooperation, these ideas will not take shape. Yet, at least for now, the Erdogans victory within PAS suggests a move towards a different direction, one that offers a different vision for the country that challenges the Umno model of governance in fundamental ways.

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