

National power: Internal challenges hamper PAS



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Jun 15, 10
5:54pm

TEXT SIZE



PAS is pursuing national power yet it does not stand out as the national leader in the opposition. Why?

We know it has reached a consensus on maintaining membership within Pakatan Rakyat, while simultaneously reaching out to non-Muslims and revamping its Islamist agenda to fit the more pluralistic dynamic within the opposition.



It has control of two state governments, and participates actively in another. We know that of the three component parties in the opposition it has the strongest mass base and institutional organisation.

The party has adapted nationally, as it is gradually shedding its image of intolerance and inflexibility. Despite these strengths, what became clear at its 56th *muktamar* over the weekend is that the party lacks a clear dynamic national direction.

PAS is facing major internal obstacles that limit it from taking on a larger national role.

Inward-oriented leadership

Foremost among the challenges is the current leadership of the party. Interestingly, PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang has emerged a consensus figure in the party, bridging more conservative and liberal groups, *ulama* and professionals alike.

He has been able to cross generational gaps as well, largely since the PAS Youth chief Nasrudin Hassan Tantawi has a similar outlook as he does, and more liberal voices in the youth have yet to emerge powerfully within the leadership.

Hadi's main strength has been his ability to keep the party unified. Given the changes in the terrain and the new roles PAS has taken on, this is quite an accomplishment. To do this he has adapted politically and transformed his own views.

This was evident in his speeches, despite their rather staid and uninspiring deliveries. Given that his speeches this *muktamar* were written by his close advisors, and not the party leadership as a whole (especially the Erdogan group), Hadi Awang's views have come a long way.

They reflect a deeper understanding of national politics, appreciation of diversity and willingness to change.



He is far from the dogmatic figure that took national stage in 1999. The dogmatic image – forgive the pun – continues to dog him, however.

Hadi Awang lacks national stature. He is an inward-oriented party president, rather than a national leader. One of the most interesting parts of his opening speech was the re-framing of the Islamic struggle with references to different parts of the Quran and development of Islamic struggle.

Here Hadi Awang excels as he transforms the discussion through the discourse that he knows, and in doing so he earns the respect of his party faithful. Ironically, this narrow focus on the Islamic struggle, along with his limited national exposure beyond Terengganu, hamper his ability to reach out to a broader national constituency, since he is perceived as closed-minded conservative ideologue (the former, perhaps not the latter, remains).

What gives Hadi strength within his own party – his conservative *ulama* background – weakens him as an accepted national leader, particularly among non-Muslims and many liberal Malays.

This issue is not just about Hadi Awang. It is deeper and goes to the core of how PAS has evolved. Most in PAS believe that an *ulama* needs to lead their party. Yet, is an *ulama* acceptable as Malaysia's national leader?

If this was not enough of a challenge, Hadi and the leadership around him (except Nik Aziz Nik Mat whose special status puts him on another plane) continue to face the questions over the 'Unity Group'.

Many in the party have serious reservations about secret Umno meetings and believe in openness. This trust issue was quietly discussed at the *muktamar* and will play out at the next party elections next year.



The most heated contest will involve the deputy president position, as Nasharuddin Mat Isa will likely face a strong challenge. Key will be whether the contest will be one-on-one, as this will likely undermine Nasharuddin's chances given the relatively small majority he received last round in a three-cornered fight.

The campaigning for the next polls began in this *muktamar*. Of all the leaders, the deputy president is the most vulnerable from his association with the 'dark force'. He has also been hampered by perceptions that he has not brought his own ideas to the challenges facing the party beyond calling for an association with Umno.

The issue of perceived non-dynamic leadership extends beyond the top, to the other wings of PAS. The leadership of the youth, women and *ulama* wings faces the perception of being lacklustre, parochial lacking ideas and being too conservative, in part since these leaders, too, are party consensus figures.

The very forces that define PAS as a party – the shared conservative ideology and practice of consensus – limit its ability to showcase the charismatic and substantive talent within the party, to allow its leaders to shine nationally.

The second echelon of leaders, shaped by the *reformasi* years and largely brought in during the latter years of former president Fadzil Mohd Noor, have quietly steered the party from behind the scenes through the challenging terrain from 2004 onwards to Pakatan.

The next party election will determine whether the party is genuinely willing to embrace its national ambitions by electing top leaders among this cohort who can be accepted nationally, or continue to remain inward-focused.

Stunted institutional transformations

The focus on the top leadership in the party obscures substantive changes within the party itself. These also played out at the *muktamar*. Consider the women's wing – it is largely comprised of professionals and members through their hard work have been allocated seats (although not substantively in Terengganu and Pahang).

The debate this round centered on a 30 percent quota for women in seat allocation and a call to reserve one of the vice-president's positions (likely in an expanded slate of VPs which did not pass this round) for women.

Both were tabled as these measures were seen to be 'too early', but the message from (some of) the women delegates were sent. It was just a few years ago that PAS was seen to be refusing to slate women candidates at all.

The glass ceiling in PAS has quietly cracked. The most obvious example of this is the election of two women to the religious consultative council, the Majlis Syura last March.

One should be careful not to equate the increased number of women with actual representation of women's issues, but within the party, a quiet revolution has occurred.

The institutional changes regarding women have not been embraced openly. Delegates in the general meeting poked fun at the 30 percent for women, ridiculing this request. Many - even within the women's wing itself - prefer the traditional role of supporting their husbands in politics, rather than taking on individual roles.



These 'traditional' attitudes revealed consistent resistance to increasing the role of women throughout the party. There is a clear view of streamlining the role of women, as indicative of Hadi Awang's speech which centred on the need for women to engage in 'moral education', rather than an acknowledgment of their professional credentials and public roles. The youth wing has similarly excluded women voices.

Given the disconnect between attitudes toward women and the increasing participation of women in PAS, it is thus not a surprise that its women leaders in the party are rarely showcased nationally.

While PAS's membership mirrors the impressive transformation of Malay women with greater economic empowerment, higher education credentials and increasing political engagement, PAS as a party has constrained their participation and dampened the voices of Malay women to shape politics.

Ironically, a similar dynamic is happening within Umno, as the female leadership and participation within that party has been largely sidelined. A similar disconnect between the party wing and the community is occurring in PAS Youth.

Like the woman's wing, there are a considerable number of well-qualified individuals in the Youth wing, with strong religious and/or professional credentials. Yet the Youth wing leadership is perhaps the most conservative group in the party after the Ulama Council.

Given election results, PAS institutionally has an advantage to win over younger voters, who - based on results in the



last three general elections - are largely more inclined to vote for the opposition.

Yet, listening to the debate and speeches in the Pemuda session, the questions whether the Youth wing is engaging effectively with the young and speaking for the young emerged. Is PAS Youth representative of the views of younger Malays or whether is it hampered by the need within the party to promote the familiar?

More substantively, what can PAS offer young Malays? Do the views of PAS Youth connect to young Malays? They are, after all, the largest share of the voting population. Here too, the challenge PAS faces in representing and connecting to the community they are seen to engage is difficult. What was clear that PAS Youth lacked the dynamism of earlier years.

PAS argues that it is a representative of the Malays. Yet do its leaders and various wings actually represent these communities? In order to fundamentally address the issue of national power, the question of effective representation looms, as PAS' institutions have yet to keep up with changes within Malay society broadly.

Meeting governance challenges

Beyond leadership and representation, lies an even harder challenge – governance. PAS still faces serious doubts over whether it can govern.

Can PAS manage the economy? Does PAS have a vision for development? Can PAS move the discussion of Malay economic empowerment beyond the issue of the NEP? These questions were particularly pertinent as the *muktamar* coincided with the announcement of the 10th Malaysia Plan. In short, is PAS as a party ready to govern?

The *muktamar* offered little answers. While Hadi Awang focused on the need for transparency in the economy and reducing corruption - consistent *reformasi* themes - he also repeated the PAS populist focus on poverty reduction, under the mantra 'PAS for All'. The economic vision and clear ideas needed to move Malaysia forward were not articulated.

There does, however, seem to be a new core, focusing on the better management of existing resources, the safe allocation of those resources with a nationalist tilt (as opposed to Brunei and Singapore) and improved distribution to the poor through education and scholarships.



Yet these were ideas even less fleshed out than the mechanisms to reach the laudable goals of the 10MP.

PAS has not allowed those with economic experience and ideas to take the national stage and transform the national debate, as it is hampered by its focus what it perceives to be the Islamist agenda, moral issues. The same institutional constraints that limit the voices of talented women and youth extend into the discussion of the national economy.

But what makes this challenge even more difficult is that economic confidence is essential to win national power. A closer look shows that they have an established economic record in governance. A pattern has emerged where the PAS *ulama* team up with professionals to govern states. Yet, the successes and

failures of the experience are not shared nationally. Little is actually known about the respective performance of PAS governments.

The traditional media avoids covering these states and the geographic remoteness reduces online national coverage. Yet, PAS itself is also reluctant to showcase its performance. By doing so, it might negatively affect dynamics within these states and possibly reflect poorly on the *ulama* leadership.

As such, the PAS record in economic governance is missing. Attention nationally has focused on two opposition states – Penang and Selangor. Gone from the radar are Kelantan and Kedah, both in the Malay heartland, and sadly, among the poorest in the country.

The 10MP numbers suggest that both states have reasons to promote their performance. Investment into both states is higher than other states in the Malay heartland, except the oil rich Terengganu. Growth numbers are on par with the national average, and higher in Kelantan than the national average.

Most important of all, the numbers of hardcore poor in these states are declining, although at a very low rate. The trends have been positive in the last few years, especially in Kelantan.



The level of entrepreneurial activity among Malays, especially in Kota Bharu, reinforces the fact that wealth is trickling down.

The PAS *muktamar* included booths that highlighted new projects in Kelantan, such as organic rice farming, and investment portfolios for Kedah where it has harnessed its advantages in solar technology manufacturing, yet these were not part of how the party presented itself in the national speeches and within the debates on the Putik floor. The link between the economy and PAS national vision remains unclear.

Instead, PAS is perceived as behind the other two states in improving economic governance. Questions are being raised why PAS state governments have not introduced state government regulatory bodies to improve transparency and reduce potential corruption and abuses of power.

Questions are being raised about the continuation of patronage-based government, despite the moves in both states to bring in investment and increase competitiveness.

Questions are being raised about the management of state-linked companies, since there is inadequate transparency over state revenues.

PAS' slow acceptance of local elections reinforces the sense that it is unwilling to transform the institutions and practices that promote better governance at the state level. Much of the resistance is within the party itself, as many are comfortable with the long-standing pattern of patronage and personal power at the state level.

The debate within PAS over these matters is as central as the 'Unity Group' discussion to the party's future nationally.



Looking inside

The new political landscape of Malaysia is not just about opposition cooperation, but the ability to meet the challenges of governing effectively.

Dynamic leadership, confidence in leaders, ability for groups to allow diversity of opinion within and represent groups broadly, to deliver results while in office and allow those results to be showcased are all part and parcel of the new terrain.

The 56th PAS *muktamar* showed that the challenges to winning national power are as much within the party as outside of it.

Part 1: [PAS preps itself for national power](#)

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