



Party polls will decide PAS' future, Pakatan's fate



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COMMENT Islamic party PAS is at a critical juncture in its history. The decisions at the party polls of the 57th Mukhtamar will - at least in the short term - resolve some of the conflicts that have been brewing within the party over its political direction and engagement.

The party delegates have a clear choice - to either transform PAS' identity and embrace a bolder vision within multiethnic Malaysia or continue the current trajectory of limited dynamism and a conflicted direction.

It is likely that when the results are tallied in typical PAS fashion, some sort of compromise will be reached to accommodate the different groups.

Yet, what will be interesting to see is whether PAS' rank-and-file gives the party greater clarity, that allows for the party to play a more prominent and dynamic national role, or whether they make a conservative turn that would be a serious blow to the future of Pakatan Rakyat, and arguably, PAS itself.



Returning to parochial politics?

Since 2008, PAS has been searching for how to play its role within Pakatan. It has boldly moved toward cooperation within the multiparty coalition (often unfairly labeled as playing second fiddle to

other partners), embraced non-Muslim membership and more prominent roles for women and broadened its engagement on governance issues, essentially moving out of its exclusive focus on religious and moral issues.

Often PAS (when compared to Umno) has come off as the more liberal Malay party, engaging issues of social justice and intervening in statesmanlike fashion after sensitive and emotive racial issues flared, such as the 2010 church bombings.



PAS has not adopted the dangerous game of racial politics, and continued to build national bonds across communities. It has taken these measures, often without the full support of some of its members, and importantly, without the full understanding of many of its members that it has become a national party.

Yet over the last year, especially the last six months, the party has lacked clarity on policy, reverting to the old mode of advocating moral supremacy and over issues such as Valentine's Day.

The move toward more conservatism and a return to the cocoon of kampong parochial politics with a narrow religious agenda in areas such as gambling and dress codes for non-Muslim journalists (issues that harp back to the narrow articulation of the Islamic state of 2004) reflects the loss of direction.



The compounding of losses in by-elections (most of which were not 'winnable' in the first place) has reinforced a sense of defeatism, and raised real concerns about PAS' ability to win over its Malay base, especially in the rural areas.

Perceived gains by Prime Minister Najib Razak and Umno in the Malay heartlands have had their effect, pushing PAS to reassess its national engagement and electoral strategies. Many in PAS have been returning to the familiar strategies of old, forgetting that these strategies have also failed - in fact quite miserably.

The party polls this week thus come at an important time. The elected leaders from the youth and women's wings to the central committee members will set the future direction of the party; they will determine how PAS plays its role in Pakatan and whether the party will become more dynamic and adopt policies that bridge, rather than divide, communities.

They will determine whether PAS will return to the old outdated moral supremacy policies or embrace a new and bold direction.

PAS' future is closely intertwined in the various contests - the deputy presidency, the vice-presidents, the central committee and women's leadership.

A narrow discussion of internal party dynamics contends the conservatives (traditionally labeled ulama) against the progressives - previously known as the professionals or more recently, Erdogans.

With the transformative changes in the Middle East, the label Erdogans has become less relevant and a closer look at the undercurrents suggests that the battle lines are more cross-cutting. There is much more going on than a simple divide as PAS is struggling to find itself.

Ulama remain dominant

A major issue that has dominated campaigning - at least for the top leadership posts - is whether the party should be led by the ulama (religious scholars). This issue came to the fore in 2010 with the release of a book by Mujahid Yusof, entitled 'Menuju PAS Baru: Krisis, Peluang dan Dinamisme'.



It called for a re-evaluation of the role of the ulama and received an outpouring of reactions, including two books challenging his arguments. The role of PAS as a national player post-March 2008 has brought this issue forward. Real questions have been being raised whether nationally, the Malaysian electorate will support an ulama prime minister.

The demands of governing - policy inputs and technocratic expertise - also have shown that PAS needs other types of leaders to get things done. In this election, the nature of PAS governance is being tested. Is PAS ready for a new model of national governance or is the resistance to change and interests involved too strong?

Given the intensity of the reaction toward any mention of transforming the role of ulama leadership, the party appears not quite ready for a new mold. Indeed, the ulama have fought back and pushed away challenges to their positions, as seen in the nomination process.

This is most obvious in the pressure to discourage competition at the youth level, assuring an ulama leader to remain at the helm. It is also shaping the contest for the deputy presidency, as some are questioning whether non-ulama Mat Sabu should hold that key post. He has clearly stated he is only interested in the deputy position in a move to offset reactions to the ulama leadership issue.

The nomination of the personable Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man reflects the momentum of ulama leaders ensuring that they continue to lead, as there is a sense that the incumbent Nasharudin Mat Isa has lost the support of earlier years.



While some believe Nasharudin may win in the three-corner fight, it is a much more of an uphill battle for the incumbent this round.

Leadership transition on the way

The intensity of the campaign for the deputy presidency points to a growing sense of the need for a party leadership transition and to think beyond the Abdul Hadi Awang presidency. While Abdul Hadi is not likely to leave anytime soon, it now on the cards as the party is setting its direction on the matter.

One thing that distinguishes PAS from other parties in Malaysia is the role that its rank-and-file play in party leadership transitions. As issues surrounding what type of person should lead the party are being openly discussed, the members are acknowledging the need to put in place a new slate of leaders.

PAS chooses from those who have built their grassroots base and respect of the membership, and given the more democratic climate in the party, the selection process is not top-down as it is in Umno.



As such, this is why the party members are looking carefully at the slate of VPs. The competition is fierce for the three positions.

Concerns are being raised about who has ideas for governing, who has the ability to win national support and who can promote the party on the national stage. More so, who is the charismatic PAS leader that can lead the country?

These concerns also extend to the deputy presidency and all of the top positions. These are increasingly salient as Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim came under more attacks, raising the ante for Pakatan to bring to the fore alternative Malay leadership.

At the VP level, Salahuddin Ayub is deemed the top favourite due to his number of nominations, but is it anyone's game now as a more reflective mood has set in due to the fact that the intense debate over ulama leadership has intertwined the deputy and VPs contests, with many delegates thinking about the slate of leaders elected rather than individuals.

Need to re-energise party

Another element that has received considerable attention has been the appreciation of the need to fight to deepen the struggle for PAS.

Ironically, as the party defeats at the polls have demoralised some, for others it has reinforced the need to ratchet up the response from the party to take on Umno more directly. As Najib has fought harder to hold onto power, it has touched a similar cord among PAS members.

Events in the Middle East have served to inspire many in PAS, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, where a willingness to go the streets to stand up to power has been etched in recent memory.



It is in this vein that Mat Sabu appeals to many. He represents the spirit of the streets of Cairo, putting himself in the frontline in the calls for justice. His ability to communicate effectively with the grassroots is unmatched among the contenders, while he simultaneously is able to connect to those outside of the party.

The prioritisation to re-energise the party is gaining ground among many in the party, especially the youth, and interestingly the women, who make up a much larger share of the voters in the party election than they have in the past.

In fact in the women's leadership contest, activism and commitment to party work are also taking center stage, consolidating support around the team of Siti Zailah Mohd Yusof and Dr Siti Mariah Mahmud.

Many want leaders who can inspire, to build the base of the party, and thus commitment and charisma are underscoring another current that cross-cuts the intensification of the ulama leadership debate.

Personality and place crucial



Further complicating the campaign are long-standing personality struggles and regional competition. Some candidates are viewed as aloof and arrogant, while others are seen as personable, humble and accessible.

Tuan Ibrahim has won considerable support on the force of his personality alone, for example. All of the leaders however have done due diligence in the party hierarchy and are known commodities.

This hasn't however prevented the rumour mill from bringing in issues of wealth and religious

backgrounds, in what are increasingly personal character assassinations, albeit more measured than those leveled nationally against the opposition or in heated Umno contests.

What is interesting to watch is the different forms the discussions of personality are taking, moving beyond traditional quiet discourse at the mosque and over tea to Facebook, email and SMS.

The most important cliques are regional. Terengganu is facing off against Kelantan openly, as each of the states is lobbying actively. It is not uncommon for different states to seek representation and leadership. But what distinguishes the regional contestation this round is its close ties with other cleavages in the campaign.

Terengganu is seen to be allied with the more conservative groups, while Kelantan is seen to encourage more diversity and progressive views. A closer look suggests that even within these states, there are divisions.

In fact, in the three traditional core PAS states - Terengganu, Kelantan and Kedah - there are sharp divisions, thus empowering the western and southern states to decide the party's fate, especially Selangor, Perak and Negeri Sembilan.

Whether these states will opt for a more conservative tack or a bold step toward more reform and openness will be crucial in determining the results.

Compromise or conservative turn

Since 2008 there has been a growing tension between different outlooks in PAS, between the more parochial Malay heartland worldview and a more national outlook that includes non-Muslims and appreciates differences among Malays in religious practice.

Most of the elected members of parliament in PAS are nationally oriented. Many in the party hierarchy are more parochial, viewing the party's future from the shelter of the familiar. The revitalisation of the party in the western and southern states of Malaysia are bringing in new voices into the party.

The party election results in this 57th Muktamar will not be just about PAS' governance, but its vision as a national party. While its commitment to Pakatan remains solid, for now, the election of leaders with more parochial outlooks will create pressure within Pakatan and raise real questions about the viability of the opposition coalition.



Differences within Pakatan will undermine their momentum for the next general elections, which arguably will be the most competitive in Malaysia's history. In order for PAS to make political gains and hold onto its current seats (many of which come from mixed constituencies), a more inclusive,

less rigid national outlook will be essential.

Parochialism will assure that the party will maintain its base, but limit its national role in the future. Interestingly, the states where PAS has been less strong traditionally will be decisive in shaping whether the party continues moving toward a larger national role.

PAS continues to abhor washing its divisions in public. Yet this election has been one of deep introspection, and many within the rank-and-file are cognisant of their importance.



It is likely that a compromise position will happen where ulama and progressives both gain, with personalities that can cooperate rather than compete against one another. Yet, personality, interests and parochialism remain strong forces buttressing a conservative turn for the party. This will split the party and would spell serious trouble for Pakatan.

PAS delegates have the power not only to shape their party's future tomorrow, but to shape the future options for all Malaysians at the next general election.

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