



Victory of the 'Erdogans' bodes well for Pakatan



Bridget Welsh
 Jun 4, 11
 4:44pm

COMMENT There was a sense of excitement in the air in Gombak this morning as the results of the PAS party polls were announced. It is a truly historic day for PAS and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition.

Stalwart Mohamed Sabu (*right*) defeated his two contenders for the deputy position (by 21 votes), three non-ulama leaders - Salahudin Ayub, Mahfuz Omar and Husam Musa - were elected vice-presidents, and non-ulama leaders secured two-thirds (12 out of 18) of the slots in the party's central committee.



The progressive forces in PAS have secured a major victory, overturning the Terengganu dominance of the party. This is the first non-ulama leadership team - except for Abdul Hadi Awang of course - since the 1982 coup against nationalist PAS president Mohamad Asri Muda, where it was stated that there should never be non-ulama leaders occupying the top posts.



The progressive forces have defeated parochial tendencies and offered a more dynamic Malay leadership for the increasingly sophisticated electorate. While the ulama still play a key role and they remain dominant in the Youth wing, the rank-and-file in the party have decisively embraced the 'spirit of Cairo' - the desire to stand up to power and embrace change.

The PAS party election results are historic in that they signal a transformation of the Islamist party with the progressives - many of whom hold elected positions - now capturing crucial positions in the party hierarchy.

At the deputy president level, the victory is ironic, in that it reverses the pattern in the last election where the three-corner fight led to Nasharudin Mat Isa holding on to the post.

This time round, his adamant refusal to withdraw and the support of Umno-owned *Utusan Malaysia* has backfired for the conservative-backed candidate and created the opening for the progressive forces, which had already campaigned hard to win the vice-presidency posts on the expectation that the deputy post would go to Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man.

The implications of these results are important as they bring an 'Arab spring' in PAS that potentially has the promise to spill over for the Pakatan opposition. They include:

a) Spirit of activism – The PAS rank-and-file have shown that they want a more active and strengthened political party to face off against Umno. They have elected leaders who are known activists and organisers, and who aim to re-energise the party.

b) Spirit of cooperation – The new leaders are categorically anti-Umno and pro-Pakatan. These leaders are known for being able to build bridges to reach other parties.

c) Spirit of inclusion – These leaders, coming from Kedah, Kelantan and Johor, are more nationalist in orientation, seeing a role for non-Muslims and women.

d) Spirit of expertise/professionalism – These leaders represent more skilled professionals, who offer stronger alternatives of Malay leaders for the electorate and more knowledge of governance, thus strengthening the electability of the party nationally.

e) Spirit of youthfulness – The relative youthfulness of the leadership slate also promises stronger engagement with the youth, especially younger Malays in the urban and semi-rural areas.

What is especially important is that the team as whole is not deeply fragmented, so that the party in this mandate has sent a clear direction toward a more outwardly focused leadership that engages the electorate and reaches out to new potential support.

A break from the past

To understand this break from the past, one has to appreciate the context of the campaigning in the party and the timing of the results. First of all, the conservative ulama group miscalculated strategically.

The ulama group remains a powerful force, but was divided and distracted in its focus on the deputy post. Rather than engage across the party and offer new ideas, they came off as power hungry, seeking position for the sake of position, without offering plausible reasons for holding office. This single-minded focus on power left a bad taste.



Yet, it is important to appreciate that not all the ulama in PAS are the same. What distinguished Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man is his broad appeal across groups and with the grassroots.

He remains a powerful leader in the party. He leaves this contest as a bridge builder between the various groups, rather than as a die-hard representative of the conservatives.

His contest for deputy was done with dignity and he did not actively campaign for the post. By contesting, he allowed the party to change. This reinforces the need to acknowledge the variation among ulama and progressive groups, as camps evolve over time. With this pendulum swing toward the progressives, Tuan Ibrahim stands tall and will continue to be a major player in the leadership, especially as his own ideas for the party are more clearly expressed.

In understanding these results, many delegates highlighted the critical need to deliver. This added to the appeal of the progressives. There is a real sense of urgency with the upcoming general election that reinforced a push toward bringing in a more activist spirit. They want results at the polls, and a party that is more prominent and vocal nationally.

The timing here is very important in that it extends beyond the general election. As Umno has pushed the racial card, fuelling insecurity among all the ethnic communities, it has inadvertently raised the issue of a strengthening of Malay leadership. PAS has shown in these party polls that you do not need to be from an elite family to gain ground politically, and that there are talented and capable Malay leaders offering to lead from all walks of life and backgrounds.

All of these new leaders come from poor families, who through hard work and commitment have risen through the ranks, showing by example that there are alternative paths to power.

The quiet force pushing for this rupture with the past are the women, who, ever practical, have pushed for a slate that can work together, that can go beyond the perceived stagnation and defeatism. The symbolic victory of the progressive team in the Muslimat set the example for the final slate - bringing two women into the final tally of the CC - and ironically, the conservative imbalance in the Youth wing provoked a counter-reaction.

This was reinforced by delegates from the more cosmopolitan states in the vote for change. The backdrop of profound transformation in the Muslim world surrounded these polls, as PAS' own mini-revolution gained ground.

Many of the newly-elected CC members are from states where PAS hopes to gain ground, such as Dr Mahfodz Mohamed from Johor. Umno is very much in the sights of a more dynamic PAS.

Reality checks for the victors

These results however are not without their challenges. There is an intense pressure for the progressive camp to deliver in the next general election. This is not easy given the need to revitalise the party and the effectiveness of the current Umno two-prong strategy of promoting Malay insecurity and heavily using financial incentives to win votes.

While the new PAS team has an advantage in the appeal to urban voters, the challenge of expanding rural support remains. It is interesting to note that that highest votes in the new CC went to Mazlan Aliman who is tied to greater PAS activism in Felda schemes.



Delivery now is not just about promises, but about governance in the PAS states, and it is not a coincidence that many of the winners are key players in Pakatan-held state governments, notably Husam Musa (*left*) in Kelantan, Azizan Abdul Razak and Amiruddin Hamzah in Kedah and Khalid Samad and Dr Siti Mariah Mahmud in Selangor. The pressure for these leaders - and the state governments they are connected to - to perform is now higher than ever.

There is no question that the results will smart for those who lost positions. For the displaced Terengganu leaders, the challenge will now be to move beyond the focus on national party power to winning the seats in that state.

For the conservative ulama, the question will be how much they will sabotage the mandate or they will wait and give the progressives a chance to perform. As positions get appointed, the issue of accommodation of those left out will be important, so as to assure a working relationship with all groups nationally. After all, the final result was very close for the deputy post.

In accommodating political divisions, the main challenge is how to engage the communities in such a way that wins support. The transformation of PAS needs a revitalised substantive strategy of engagement, one that reflects the ideas and ideals of the new leadership team. This is never easy, especially in a context where politics of race muddy the political terrain.

The combined focus on race and scandal, sex video galore, has left behind the serious issues of better governance, welfare and justice. The progressives now have to show how progressive they really are. It is not enough to be labelled as such - the strategies and engagement should aim to mirror the ideals. This is no easy task indeed.

Some thorny problems



While the progressive victory as a whole bodes well for opposition cooperation, there are some thorny problems that remain on the table.

First, how does PAS deal with a less vibrant PKR and respond to the attacks on Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim. This issue is a minefield within PAS that the progressives will have to navigate carefully.

Second, how does PAS showcase itself as an equal partner in DAP dominant states to dispel the image that it is kowtowing to a non-Muslim party. That is also not easy.

From the challenges of delivery and division to the adoption of new strategies of engagement and cooperation, the victory of the progressive is not without obstacles. The delegates have opted for action and a more dynamic leadership - at least for the next two years.

PAS is entering a new era. There is indeed a new spirit in the air that embodies change and reminiscences of an Arab spring.

DR BRIDGET WELSH is associate professor of political science at Singapore Management University. She attended the PAS muktamar as an observer. Welsh can be reached at bwelsh@smu.edu.sg.