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2009

Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman. (2009). PAS Beyond the 2009 Party Elections: Islamism or Post-Islamism?. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 060). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/82456>

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PAS Beyond the 2009 Party Elections: Islamism or Post-Islamism?

Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

18 June 2009

The recent PAS General Assembly (Muktamar) seems to show that PAS is reverting to its conservative Islamist position. Yet a closer scrutiny of the Muktamar will reveal that the party is more concerned with its strategic political position than an Islamist agenda.

SINCE THE formation of the opposition alliance, Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance), PAS has made a concerted attempt to remake its image from that of a puritanical Islamist party to a more open, pluralistic mainstream party.

Pro-UMNO versus Anti-UMNO

The most significant outcome of the assembly was the decision of its members to retain the incumbent deputy president, Nasharuddin Mat Isa. He fended off the challenge from Husam Musa, touted as the leader of the so-called professionals group and a close ally of opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim. From the start, the race for the deputy presidency has been portrayed as one between the Erdogan group (named after Turkish Prime Minister, Reccip Tayyib Erdogan who moderated the Islamist agenda of the ruling AKP or Prosperity Justice Party in Turkey) led by Husam Musa and the ulama group led by Nasharuddin Mat Isa.

However, it must be noted that there is actually little that differentiates the two factions when it comes to the Islamist agenda. Nasharuddin was himself responsible for moderating PAS' Islamist agenda. Thus, the move for unity talks with UMNO has little to do with ideology. Rather it is a pragmatic political decision by PAS to elevate the party.

The real dividing line between the two factions lies in the question of whether PAS should remain an integral part of the PR or seek close ties with UMNO. Party insiders have noted that the initial talks with UMNO were done with the approval of Anwar. This was in tandem with Anwar's plan to secure federal power through defections from the government MPs. These talks were limited to small groups of MPs. It was in the midst of these talks that UMNO counter-offered PAS leaders to join the ruling

Barisan Nasional coalition in return for positions within the federal and state governments. It was then that the idea of forming a unity government was mooted.

While these talks did not produce any significant outcomes partly due to opposition from PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat, it divided the party between two factions. Having been part of the government when PAS joined the BN coalition in 1974, Nik Aziz believes that the UMNO-led federal government is simply using PAS in its moment of weakness. On the other hand, many PAS leaders have not forgiven Anwar for having ‘betrayed’ PAS by joining UMNO in 1982 despite his close relationship with PAS leaders.

On a more important note, some PAS leaders fear that the party will be sidelined if the PR is to come to power. They believe that PAS will be given a minor role in such a government. Some observers also noted the fact that PAS leader, Abdul Hadi Awang, harbours hopes of being the prime minister rather than play second fiddle to Anwar. Some believed that PAS stands a better chance doing this through the BN rather than PR.

Post-Islamism

The French scholar Olivier Roy, in his book, *Globalised Islam: The Search for the New Ummah*, popularised the concept of post-Islamism. To Roy, post-Islamists believe that politics should subsume religion and religion should only provide certain guidelines in the political system. Many of the outcomes of the recent Muktamar is reflective of PAS’ post-Islamist position. Contrary to many assertions that PAS has backtracked on its reform agenda and returned to its Islamist roots, PAS has firmly placed itself as a post-Islamist party ala the AKP in Turkey.

Its decision to elevate the PAS Supporters’ Club, a club formed for its non-Muslim supporters, into a full wing of the party is radical even by the standards of moderate Islamist parties. Few moderate Islamist parties have given non-Muslims full membership rights. This decision was made despite the fact that many of its members opposed such a move. However, it shows that PAS is pragmatic enough to realise it cannot achieve power in Malaysia without the support of non-Muslims.

Yet, despite this seemingly enlightened position, PAS members also called on the Malaysian Fatwa Council to ban Sisters in Islam (SIS), a Muslim feminist group. For many observers, PAS’ position seems to indicate that it is backtracking from its post-Islamist agenda. Yet, such a position should not be seen as ‘extreme’ by Malaysian Islamic standards. UMNO leaders have in many instances called for the banning of SIS. Perhaps the decision to focus on SIS is an attempt by PAS to present itself as a defender of Islam and appease its more conservative constituents.

The Future of PAS

The future of PAS is looking increasingly uncertain. Nik Aziz has openly criticised the idea of forming a unity government with BN, an idea supported by Hadi, the party president, and his deputy Nasharuddin. This is a departure from PAS’ leaders preference to trash issues in private rather than in public. The appointment of Mustafa Ali, seen to be another supporter of the unity government, as the new secretary-general could exacerbate the division within the party.

It is possible that party members disenchanted with its leadership might either form a new party or join the People’s Justice Party (PKR). It seems natural for Islamist parties to move to a new post-Islamist phase to face their challenges and hurdles. While this may be so with PAS, the outcome of the latest tussle within the party will determine whether it will emerge as the most important political party in Malaysia or become irrelevant.

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