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Malaysia's Opposition Alliance at the Crossroads: Beginning of the End?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The Malaysian Pakatan Rakyat opposition alliance is at a crossroads following the recent crisis over the Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Selangor: Whether the three partners, PKR, DAP, PAS, part ways or remain together depends on how the surprising turmoil within the Islamist party PAS is resolved.

Commentary

THE MALAYSIAN Islamist party, PAS, held its *muktamar* or annual congress, in the southern Johor town of Batu Pahat on 18-20 September 2014. Watching the tension-filled *muktamar* was like waiting for a slow burning fuse to explode, as one after another, the party leadership responded to delegates' criticisms of their handling of the Selangor *Menteri Besar* or "MB" crisis. That was essentially an internal squabble of its opposition partner PKR over its attempt to replace its chief minister in Selangor state.

However what began as a PKR problem quickly and surprisingly spread to engulf PAS, primarily because the spillover was not well handled by PAS' president, Hadi Awang. For some inexplicable reason, Hadi had refused to go along with PKR's sole nominee for the post, Dr Wan Azizah - its president and wife of Anwar Ibrahim, even though the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance) which also included the DAP had agreed to this. Hadi's resistance divided PAS internally and even threatened to bring down the entire alliance. Though the PAS leaders defended their positions during the *muktamar*, they only succeeded in stirring up the deep division between the party's two pillars – the ulama or clerics and the professionals whose influence has grown over the years.

Hadi's Second Mandate?

PAS' secretary-general Mustafa Ali tried to cool down the temperature by paraphrasing Albert Einstein, who famously said science without religion is blind, and religion without science is lame. Mustafa intoned that PAS without the ulama is blind, and PAS without the professionals is lame. Indeed, he added, PAS rested on a third pillar: the activists who were neither ulama nor professional, yet all three – the ulama, professionals and activists - were critically needed to pull PAS through.

But Hadi, whose speech was much anticipated, had other thoughts. He had been criticised for breaching agreed positions over the MB crisis. Shockingly, he argued that there was no written agreement. In a convoluted way, he ended up proposing three names other than Wan Azizah to the Selangor Sultan for royal assent.

In the process he alienated many within and outside PAS who were unhappy with Hadi's highly controversial handling of the issue. One consequence was the breaking of ranks of two PAS assemblymen to give Wan Azizah the majority in the opposition-dominated state assembly, although to no avail in the end.

The divide between the conservative ulama and the professionals that the MB crisis resurrected was more threatening to PAS. At the core, the tussle was over the fundamental question of the leadership of the ulama and the leadership of the professionals, the latter variously known also as the 'progressives', 'Anwarinas' and 'Erdoganists'.

Hadi has always been identified with the ulama leadership in PAS since the early 1980s, coinciding with the rise of Anwar in UMNO. Both came from the same source: the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) which Anwar led before joining UMNO. But the Selangor MB crisis showed that notwithstanding their common origins, Hadi and Anwar had dormant differences which were waiting to boil over.

In recent years, the ulama in PAS have reasserted their leadership, triggered in part by the emergence of a younger generation of clerics, some even more conservative. Yet PAS members have, significantly, been supportive of the professionals/progressives, as seen in the last party election when they successfully defended their influential presence in the party.

Hadi's dithering leadership

Against this backdrop, Hadi has been displaying a dithering – even confusing - leadership posture, swaying between conservatism and progressiveness. In the process, he sent mixed signals to the point of being accused of weakness, leading even to unconfirmed reports of an attempt to replace him. There is no doubt that he has been under severe stress and has failing health, but the Selangor MB crisis must have been his last straw. The old fiery Hadi resurfaced as he defended the ulama faction; it was nothing short of explosive.

He let loose a volley, targeting no-one in particular, yet clear enough to refer to PAS' opposition allies, and to the party's own leaders who had taken the non-PAS side in the MB crisis, using words that were unprecedented in PAS gatherings. Declaring that he did not want to lead PAS members to hell, Hadi lashed out at 'baruah' (stooges), 'brokers' and 'hypocrites'. He also accused unspecified parties of '*curi MP*' (stealing MPs) and '*beli MP*' (buying MPs). In the end, it was a speech of many don'ts: don't form '*jemaah dalam jemaah*' (group within a group); don't treat PAS like a 'hotel'; don't leak party secrets; don't give your loyalty to others; and don't help your enemies.

If Hadi's first 'mandate' as a rising cleric in 1981 – *Amanat Haji Hadi* - had split Malaysia's Malay community between PAS and UMNO - it would not be out of place to call Hadi's Batu Pahat speech his second mandate - *Amanat Haji Hadi Kedua* – that would split the opposition.

Three possible trajectories

The Batu Pahat *muktamar* may go down in history as PAS' most divisive. It pushed PAS, but also the Pakatan, to a new crossroads. The tension between the ulama and the progressives, may have been contained for now, but it is likely to resurface nearer the party's election in a year's time. Expect a battle *royale* that could make or break PAS.

Unless both factions consciously decide to close ranks, the first possible trajectory is a split – either the professionals get booted out; or they leave; or the ulama themselves part ways. The move to form PasMa, a pressure-group society within PAS, is a sign of the progressives getting restless with the way things are going.

The second trajectory is the collapse of the Pakatan alliance, following from a break up of PAS. The formation of PasMa shows that the Pakatan allies in PKR and DAP realise this distinct possibility but are making pre-emptive moves to save Pakatan. The third trajectory, however, has a happier ending: all three parties – PAS, PKR and DAP – come to their senses and reconcile, driven by the thought of possible victory in the next general election that must be called by 2018.

Although Pakatan lost the last one in 2013, they won the popular vote and are just a hair's breadth away from power. They would realise soon enough that it would be foolish to throw everything out of the window. The question is will they?

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