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Title	Election boycott should worry Malaysian government
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Citation	Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman. (2007). Election boycott should worry Malaysian government. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 015). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2007
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/4033
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RSIS COMMENTARIES (15/2007)

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Election Boycott Should Worry Malaysian Government

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2 March 2007

THE decision of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) to boycott the recent Batu Talam by-election in Pahang, coupled with its subsequent announcement that it may avoid contesting the next general elections, should be viewed with concern by the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) government. PAS' boycott of the by-election was an unprecedented move by the party. Subsequently, one of its vice-presidents Husam Musa announced the possibility that the opposition may also boycott the next Malaysian general elections that are due to be called by early 2009.

Fear of Electoral Defeat

Various analyses of PAS' decision have argued that the party avoided the Batu Talam contest because of the fear of certain defeat. It was argued that a bad defeat this time would nullify any psychological gains the party may have made over the last year due to problems within the BN government as well as Dr Mahathir Mohamad's criticism of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. By boycotting the Batu Talam polls, PAS would avoid damaging the morale of its rank-and-file ahead of the next general elections that the opposition party believes could be held as early as the second half of 2007. Khairy Jamaluddin, the deputy chief of UMNO Youth, writing in the *New Straits Times*, had argued that the boycott is PAS' face-saving move in anticipation of a huge electoral loss. However, a closer scrutiny of PAS' politics will reveal that the party had always fielded candidates in all elections even in states where the party stood little or no chance of winning such as in Sarawak, Sabah and Johor. At times, the party had fielded candidates even if it meant losing its deposit. At the same time, while it was unlikely that the party could have won the seat in Batu Talam, they could have taken away some support for BN by winning more votes in the by-election than it secured in Batu Talam in the 2004 general election. Such a scenario was entirely possible given the internal division within UMNO as a result of Mahathir's attempts to discredit the Abdullah administration.

State of Democracy in Malaysia

A more plausible reason for the boycott is the disillusionment of the party's leadership with the current political system. The decision to boycott stems from the party's conviction that the Malaysian electoral system is marred with irregularities. The party cited the Chairman of the Malaysian Elections Commission, Tan Sri Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman's suggestion that the electoral system needed to be reformed to allow for free and fair elections. Notwithstanding its authority to supervise general elections in the country, the EC does not have the power to determine the establishment of political parties; the power to handle all situations during campaign seasons; the power to ensure fair and free reporting by the local media; the power to prosecute persons who misuse public facilities for their campaigns; the power to address issues pertaining to party funding; and the power to control and prevent corruption and vote-buying during elections. At the same time, Tan Sri Abdul Rashid

mentioned that the commission was not empowered to question the residency of a person who is registered to vote in an area, resulting in the proliferation of phantom votes. These 'phantom voters' are non-qualified individuals whose names appear on the electoral rolls. Related to this is the problem of 'missing voters' -- qualified and registered individuals whose names are missing from the electoral rolls. Indeed, the issue of who gets included in the electoral roll and who gets excluded is a major one in Malaysia. Such candid comments from an individual seen to be allied to the government reflects a serious problem in the electoral system, which dents its image as a democratic country. This situation can thus explain PAS' decision not to contest in the Batu Talam by-election and possibly future elections in Malaysia.

Fear of an Extremist Turn

In their book, *Islam and Democracy*, John Esposito and John Voll argued that Muslim regimes tend to get the kinds of opposition they deserve. In political contexts where a democratic setting prevails, the Islamic movements and parties tend to be moderate and accommodating. However, these movements become more radical when dealt with in a harsh manner or when they have lost faith in the political system. Algeria is a prime example of how Islamic parties tend to become marginalised resulting in the emergence of more radical groups. After the impressive performance of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) at the country's primary polls in 1992, the Algerian military decided to cancel the elections and declared a state of emergency. This move resulted in the formation of radical and violent splinter groups such as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) by younger members of the FIS, perpetrating acts of violence to achieve their goals.

On the other hand, Islamic parties like PAS are an example of how a democratic system can successfully incorporate Islamic parties within the system. However, the attempts by the Malaysian government to contain PAS and PAS' subsequent decision to boycott the elections could spell the beginning of problems for the country. As a political party, PAS has one of the best track records of working within the system. They have never been implicated for using underhanded means of achieving their goals, despite attempts by the government to link the party to terrorist groups such as the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM).

However, the disillusionment within its ranks with the country's political system could result in the more radical elements within the party resorting to violent means or turning to other radical groups to achieve their aims. PAS' decision not to contest in future elections, if it becomes established policy, should therefore be viewed with trepidation.

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