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Struggle for PAS' Soul: Ulama and non-Ulama Partnership Stays

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The Islamist party PAS survived its most intense internal leadership struggle in years with the ulama class given a clear reminder by members: their leadership, while revered, is not exclusive and must retain the proven partnership with the professionals and activists.

Commentary

THE MOST intense internal struggle for the soul of PAS ended with the ulama or cleric class discovering the limits to how far they can go in determining the future of PAS. Delegates to the just-concluded party polls who were initially expected to sweep away the non-ulamas in their first test since the recent general election, stunned with their independent-mindedness. They voted in a new leadership that forced the ulama to stick to the proven partnership with the non-ulama.

Their message was clear: a symbiotic relationship between the ulama and non-ulama is a winning formula for PAS as it aspires to be a national party that appeals to a wider multi-ethnic electorate. In so doing, the delegates had rolled back the push by a group of young ulama to assert the leadership of the ulama class in PAS. In other words, the young ulama had failed - for now - to curtail the strong influence of the 'non-ulama'. This is a blanket term for three groups variously described as "progressives", "Erdoganists" or "Anwaristas" but who in essence comprised technocrats, professionals and activists seen as in tune with the thinking of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Closing the ulama-professionals divide

The run-up to the 59th PAS Muktamar or general assembly had been dramatic and uncharacteristic of PAS. There had been intense rumours, which PAS leaders said were fanned by their nemesis UMNO, of a growing divide between the ulama or "conservatives" and the professionals or "progressives". In truth, such labels are simplistic as there are ulama who are "progressive" and professionals who are "conservative". Regardless, the talk was that the ulama class, driven more by their younger fellow clerics, were pushing out the non-ulama who were regarded as having compromised too much PAS' Islamic agenda to their opposition allies in Pakatan Rakyat, especially Anwar.

There were oblique campaigns by some young ulama in the social media to discredit the professionals in PAS, such as painting them as theologically liberal, which in Malaysia is a bad word. The mood among the

professionals was tense as they refrained from campaigning. But the setback for the young ulama came in two waves: the first was the election of the leadership of the *Dewan Pemuda* or PAS youth wing which the young ulama failed to completely sweep. Although there were several young ulama in the line-up, the critical post of Ketua or head went to Suhaizan Kaiat, widely seen as a non-ulama.

Setback number two came the next day in the election for the main leadership of PAS: Re-elected were virtually all the incumbent non-ulama comprising professionals and activists, including those who came under heavy fire from the supporters of the young ulama. Mohamad Sabu or Mat Sabu retained his post as deputy president, beating off a challenge by the deputy chief minister of the PAS-controlled state of Kelantan, Amar Nik Abdullah – despite Mat Sabu being criticised as a closet Shia.

Husam Musa, the non-ulama blue-eyed boy of ulama mentor Nik Aziz, retained his vice-president post despite attacks on his leadership. Salahuddin Ayub, another non-ulama, topped the list of three vice-presidents while the only ulama to break through the professionals' hold at the top was Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man. His entry came at the expense of Mahfuz Omar, who lost despite his long years as a PAS activist. The president's post held by Hadi Awang was uncontested.

Overall, the new PAS leadership leaned towards the non-ulama, although the president saw it as evenly balanced. Apart from Hadi Awang, a respected cleric at ease with both factions, the deputy president Mat Sabu who spent time in jail with Anwar in their younger days, and the three vice-presidents, the 18-strong central working committee has nine ulama and nine non-ulama or professionals.

Rise of the young ulama

Clearly, the PAS delegates who voted in the new leadership had their own minds. No amount of what they saw as subterfuge by external parties and the pro-UMNO media could influence them to vote in an UMNO-friendly line-up. While they held in high regard the ulama for their Islamic charisma and leadership, they also knew that as a political party, PAS needed more than the ulama to realise their dream of capturing Putrajaya, the seat of political power.

Indeed, this was also the position of Hadi Awang. In a highly significant remark prior to the elections, he declared it *haram* or sinful to separate the ulama and the professionals. During the weekend closing, Hadi again stressed the oneness of the PAS leadership, expressing satisfaction with the new line-up as a healthy mix of ulama, professionals and activists.

Notwithstanding their setbacks, the ulama have also driven home the centrality of their position and that they were the most qualified to lead an Islamist party. This was a far cry from the past when they remained aloof from the rank-and-file, issuing edicts for the party to follow. Their assertiveness is coming at a time when many of the senior ulama are ageing: Nik Aziz came to the opening with a walking stick; the head of the ulama council Harun Taib, was present in a wheel chair; the deputy head Haron Din was not present for health reasons; and even Hadi the president said he was not really well.

Significantly, a cohort of young ulama is emerging, positioning themselves as potential successors. Some of the more prominent ones are Nasruddin Hassan Tantawi, the former youth chief; Nik Abduh, the son of Nik Aziz; Mohd Khalil Abdul Hadi, the son of the party president. One of the most aggressive young ulama was Nazaruddin Mohamad, who is also Hadi's son-in-law. But while Mohd Khalil was easily elected as the new deputy youth chief, Nazaruddin's strident opposition of the professionals did not go down too well and may have backfired.

Future of ulama leadership

While the ulama class may not have succeeded in eclipsing the non-ulama, there is no certainty that they will not try again. It depends much on how the ulama feel about the state of PAS as an Islamist party. Increasingly this will also be determined by the young ulama as they rise up the ranks.

The challenge for PAS, some Malaysian scholars say, is to produce ulama whose quality can match past leaders like Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy and Fadhil Noor who straddled both the religious and secular worlds. Indeed, the challenge is to produce leaders who can lead PAS as a truly national party that enjoys the support of the majority of voters in Malaysia's plural society if it aspires for popularity and power. Will the young ulama on their own be enough? How will their emergence impact the party and the wider electorate?

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