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The Passing of Nik Aziz Nik Mat: Legacy of PAS' Spiritual Leader

By Farish A. Noor

Synopsis

The passing of Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the late Spiritual Leader of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS, has left an enormous void in the party and the political landscape of Malaysia. Though his religious educational background was traditional and conservative, he was one of the more pragmatic and realistic leaders of the party, who transformed PAS into what it is today.

Commentary

TUAN GURU Nik Aziz Nik Mat was one of the most well-known and familiar political-religious leaders in Malaysia, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that he was known throughout the country. His popularity began to rise from the 1980s when he, along with a number of religious scholars (Ulama) took over the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS after deposing its leader Asri Muda. Thus began the rise of the 'Ulama faction' and the re-orientation of the party in the direction of political Islam in step with the global emergence of Islamism from the 1980s to the late 1990s.

In Malaysia today he was also known as the *Murshid'ul Am* or Spiritual Leader of PAS and the one who was most supportive of the reformist-modernist wing within the party, sometimes referred to as the 'Erdogan faction'. The question arises as to how and why a traditional and conservative religious scholar such as Nik Aziz could have lent his support to the party's moderate-reformist wing, who in turn brought the party into the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance) coalition led by Anwar Ibrahim. To understand the rationale behind Nik Aziz's thinking, it is important to revisit the man's past and consider his early religious education abroad, and his experiences in Malaysia and overseas.

Product of madrasah education

Nik Aziz first attended madrasahs (religious schools) in Malaysia, but was then sent to India to further his studies. In India, he studied at the Darul Uloom madrasah of Deoband, Uttar Pradesh and it was there that he was first exposed to currents of religio-political thought in the Indian subcontinent. After graduating from Deoband in 1957, he proceeded to Lahore, Pakistan where he studied *Tafsir* (Quranic exegesis), and then to Egypt where he studied *Fiqh* (religious jurisprudence) at the well-known al-Azhar university in Cairo.

It has to be noted that in India, Pakistan and Egypt Nik Aziz did not merely study religious subjects but was also exposed to the currents of political Islam of the time: The 1950s and 1960s were the decades where political Islam was on the rise, with prominent Muslim scholar-activists such as Syed Abul Alaa Maudoodi, Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al-Banna becoming better known. In the course of several interviews that I had conducted with him, Nik Aziz admitted that he was less inclined towards the more poetic and/or spiritual variants of Islam that were found in India: On one occasion he was invited to perform a religious missionary tour with the spiritually-inclined Tablighi Jama'at movement in India, but declined on the grounds that he found their practice of Islam 'world-denying and life-negating'.

Nik Aziz also spoke fondly of his time in Egypt, where he professed an admiration for the nationalist project of Gamal Abdel Nasser who had tried to modernise the country and who was seen as one of the leaders of the Pan-Arab nationalist movement. It was during this period – until his return to Malaysia in 1962 – that Nik Aziz developed his own approach to political Islam.

Alliance of Islamists and professionals

Nik Aziz's educational background was traditional and conservative, and in many of the religious schools he studied, the teaching was based on the standard *Dars-I Nizami* curriculum that was introduced in the 11th century. Yet notwithstanding his conservative leanings, his personal experience of living in India, Pakistan and Egypt in the 1950s and early 1960s exposed him to contemporary currents of Muslim activism that later inspired and shaped his own political approach.

After taking over the Islamist party PAS in 1982, he, along with other Islamist-activist leaders like Yusof Rawa, began the internal transformation of the party and actively courted the membership and support of young Muslim professionals and technocrats into PAS.

It was from the 1980s that PAS became a truly modern organisation with strong mobilisation and communications capabilities, as a result of the alliance between the Ulama and professionals that Nik Aziz and Yusof Rawa promoted. Nik Aziz understood the need for a new kind of leadership and membership for the party that would allow it to mobilise faster and respond better to both domestic and international challenges.

The younger generation of professionals on the other hand valued the religious knowledge and moral credibility of men like Nik Aziz as they rejected the capital-driven developmental model they saw in Malaysia and other parts of the post-colonial world.

Nik Aziz's passing thus leaves behind an enormous void in the leadership of PAS, and raises questions about where the party might head in the near future. But in recounting his personal history, it is instructive to note that even conservative-traditionalist scholars like him were able to appreciate the importance of networks and pragmatic coalitions as part of political praxis.

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