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The Ulama Strike Back: Whither PAS and Pakatan?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The latest PAS elections have seen the decisive reassertion of the central leadership of the ulama class. How will this impact on the future of political Islam and opposition politics in Malaysia?

Commentary

PURIST ULAMA or religious scholars won near-total control of Malaysia's Islamist party PAS in just-concluded elections, backed by a younger generation of clerics who displayed a surprising knack for this-worldly party politics. Their sweeping victory was widely expected, yet came as a shock to many, leading some local analysts to aptly describe this an "ulama tsunami". It culminated a long struggle for control between the more conservative ulama and the pragmatic professionals that has been going on for years and peaked at the 61st *Muktamar* or general assembly on 4-6 June 2015.

The ulama captured all key leadership positions, returning Hadi Awang as president by a landslide and installing one of their own – Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man - as the new deputy leader. From their base in the Ulama Council, the ulama group outvoted all the professionals and strengthened their grip by winning almost all seats in the main executive committee, while expanding their dominance to the Pemuda (Youth) and Wanita (Women's) wings. It was a strong "comeback" of sorts for the ulama who have always claimed the mantle of leadership that was shared in a tenuous symbiotic relationship with the professionals who flocked to PAS in numbers since 1998 with the ouster of Anwar Ibrahim from UMNO. That relationship is now as good as broken.

Controversial victory

But the strong re-assertion of the ulama class has been highly controversial. Increasingly uneasy with the professionals for their lukewarm support for Hadi over his handling of ties with PAS' opposition allies, the pro-ulama group adopted a campaign tactic that was alien to PAS by the use of *chai* lists, a practice ironically borrowed from UMNO. This is a "menu" of preferred candidates first popularised by UMNO's ally the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). The ulama even made it official by uploading it on the Dewan Ulama Facebook on the eve of the youth elections. The strategy was devastatingly effective that the youth wing was the first to fall completely to the ulama, followed by the women's.

By the time the main election battle for the central committee took place on 4 June, it was a foregone conclusion: All the big names from among the professionals, also known variously as progressives, Erdogans and Anwaristas, were knocked out: Amongst them were Hadi's challenger, Ustaz Ahmad Awang; the popular deputy president Mohamad "Mat" Sabu; two of the three vice-presidents Salahuddin Ayub and Husam Musa, and even the son of a former president, Dr Mujahid Yusof Rawa.

The victory margins for the ulama were so wide that they virtually cast a cloud over the democratic nature of the elections. For instance Hadi won 928 votes while his challenger Ahmad secured 233 from the almost 1,200 votes cast – a yawning margin that was a pattern throughout. A stunned Mat Sabu described this as "strange", though he had not expected to win given the bitter campaign against him by the pro-Hadi camp. He had been critical of Hadi's handling of the party's relationship with its opposition partners especially the secularist Democratic Action Party (DAP). Hadi's challenger decried the entry of the "chai culture" into PAS which he said rendered the ulama's victory "undignified".

End of Nik Aziz era and rise of Young Turks

The key figures among the purist ulama are well-known. Apart from Hadi, the other is Dr Haron Din, a conservative ulama who is popular regionally. He took over the mantle of *Mursyidul Am* or Spiritual Leader when highly respected Nik Aziz Nik Mat passed away earlier this year. When he was alive, Nik Aziz was the visionary guardian of the professionals, keeping the conservatives at bay and was severely anti-UMNO. In a way, the re-assertion of the ulama class marks the end of the Nik Aziz era.

There is also an *other-worldly* factor to explain the return of the purists and the conservative ulama. Hadi had recently survived a heart attack and a near-death experience. He bounced back a more determined leader, convinced that he must now lead PAS to achieve its long-standing goal of an Islamic society. Hence his current push for *hudud* or the Islamic criminal code. Haron Din also went through a health issue: once sickly, he seemed to have become more energised after a successful operation.

But the more significant development is the emergence of the conservative Young Turks. More organisationally savvy than their senior brethren, the Young Turks are more accurately referred to as *ustaz* and *ustazah* - male and female religious scholars and teachers yet to attain the more revered stature of ulama. Still they have shown themselves to be as purist if not more fundamentalist than their seniors.

Interestingly, the key figures among the Young Turks are sons or sons-in-law of senior ulama. The new youth leader, Nik Abduh is the son of the late Spiritual Leader Nik Aziz. Curiously, he is a contrast to his pragmatist father and is more aligned to the thinking of Hadi. The party president's son, Khalil Abdul Hadi, was elected deputy youth leader. The leader among the Young Turks appears to be Nasaruddin Hassan Tantawi, a charismatic speaker who once led the youth wing. It was Nasaruddin who warned not to push the ulama too far with this tough talk: "Beneath our robes, we too have knuckles and knees."

Whither PAS?

The decisive reassertion of the pro-ulama class in PAS is not good news for at least two key groups. The first is the professionals who now have to decide whether to leave PAS to form a new party, or stay in the name of reconciliation and reconsolidation, to fight another day. The second and more immediate impact is on the opposition alliance, Pakatan Rakyat (PR), in particular the DAP. The victorious ulama have swiftly proposed to cut ties with DAP but to remain in Pakatan – a motion yet to be passed but so controversial that it heated up the last day of the party assembly.

The ulama made it clear that this was in retaliation for DAP's unfriendly move to cut ties with Hadi who the DAP had criticised for his confusing flip-flop decisions as an opposition ally. But the root of the intra-opposition crisis stems from their ideological differences over PAS' push for hudud.

Whichever way we look at it, PAS is badly split post-Muktamar and is moving towards the next general election as a wounded party. A more conservative PAS that does not have the full support of

its allies DAP and the PKR is almost certain to lose more seats in the coming elections, but the purists do not seem to worry. What kind of PAS will emerge under the total dominance of the pro-ulama group? Will the strain with the DAP be the last straw that finally break the camel's back, and ultimately unravel the already divided Pakatan opposition alliance?

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