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After the Muktamar: Is a New PAS Emerging?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Malaysia's Islamist party PAS held its 63rd congress amid huge publicity of a full and complete break from the opposition alliance. The bigger significance, however, is what this all means and what future direction PAS will take.

Commentary

ON 29 APRIL 2017, soon after the evening call to prayer, a freak storm broke out where the 63rd PAS Muktamar or party congress and elections were being held in Alor Star, Kedah. Many tents collapsed, injuring several people, though none too seriously. The PAS breakaway party, Amanah, was swift to issue a statement of sympathy. PAS president Hadi Awang later described the strong wind as a divine test for PAS – “as well as our opponents”.

The storm, an unprecedented event during a muktamar, however, did not derail the PAS congress, nor distract it from its main agenda: to chart a new course through the much bigger tempest in Malaysian politics. Indeed the big question on everyone's mind was what kind of PAS would emerge from the gathering.

No Ordinary Congress

This year's PAS muktamar was significant. Firstly, it was a party election year – and just before the country's 14th general election which has to be called by mid-2018, but widely expected sometime this year. Secondly, PAS was to decide whether to make the final breakaway from the opposition coalition which it helped form two elections ago. All eyes were on a formal termination of its political cooperation pact –

tahaluf siyasi – with the last of its opposition links, the People’s Justice Party (PKR) led by the wife of Anwar Ibrahim.

Thirdly, this complete break, if ultimately endorsed by PAS’ *Majlis Shura Ulama* (Council of Ulama), would be as good as launching PAS on its own trajectory, while possibly sinking any lingering chances of dethroning the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) led by Prime Minister Najib Razak’s UMNO. Indeed, ahead of the PAS congress, there was much talk that Najib would exploit PAS’ final break with the opposition alliance Pakatan Harapan (PH) by calling the widely-expected GE14 before the Ramadan fasting month starts in the last week of May.

Going forward, the muktamar threw up a clearer picture of what the Islamist party could look like after the 2015 purge of its core of politically-savvy reformists and professionals. All signs seemed to point to a “new” or repositioned PAS emerging, striking out on its own leading a *third bloc*, and playing the role of a *kingmaker* – two key words quite frequently heard during the congress week.

Indeed, the Alor Star muktamar also threw up some early signs of PAS forging a new vision and strategy of going alone in an increasingly unpredictable, and uncertain, political landscape. This explains why PAS seems conflicted as to whether it should cut off completely ties with the opposition alliance, or forge a united front with the ruling UMNO based on the grand idea of Malay-Muslim unity.

New PAS, leading a New Opposition Coalition?

There are three core elements in PAS’ new posture. The first is the rise of what it calls *Blok Ketiga* or the Third Bloc, positioned as a new coalition called *Gagasan Sejahtera* (Group of Harmony). This new political alliance will presumably be led by PAS but comprising public personalities, community leaders, former senior officials and NGOs. In his congress speech on 29 April, party leader Hadi Awang described this as “the foundation to face the increasingly tense political atmosphere”.

The second element is the push for a *Gelombang Tsunami Hijau* (Green Tsunami Wave) for harmonious and peaceful change, an approach that will “unite various races” who will at the same time “understand the aspirations of the Muslim community”.

The third element is a vision to be launched ahead of the coming general election called *Wawasan Induk Negara Sejahtera* (WINS) or Harmonious Nation Vision. Guided by this vision, *Gagasan Sejahtera* will strive for harmony, justice, transparency and effective governance with Islam as the guide, “consistent with the position of Islam as a religion of the Federation”.

Electoral politics and political change will be pursued without conflict while avoiding “the politics of hate, community enmity and chauvinism”. At a press conference later, Hadi said PAS was opposed to the Democratic Action Party (DAP) because it was “chauvinistic” and “against the role of Islam in the country although Islam is the religion of the Federation”.

In terms of electoral strategy, PAS projected a target of winning 40 parliamentary

seats and capturing five states, presumably through the third bloc. Although no official statement has been made, the five states are said to be Trengganu, Kedah, Pahang and Selangor in addition to Kelantan. These targets were first raised at the muktamar by the outgoing PAS Youth leader Nik Abduh Nik Aziz, son of the late PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz, endorsed by party president Hadi, and backed up by the head of the PAS research arm Zuhdi Marzuki. Dr Zuhdi said PAS' targets were "not empty talk" but based on research and a scan of "a hundred scenarios".

Bold Vision or High Ambition?

The vision, mission and strategy unveiled by the repositioning PAS following the 2015 split that led to the birth of Amanah is unprecedented for its clarity of thought and strategic design. It is also uncharacteristic of Hadi when making his regular speeches at the party's congresses. This suggests the background role of a more sophisticated speech writer or strategic thinking team.

While the plan looks good on paper, questions are, however, being asked whether the post-2015 PAS is being driven by too high an ambition that is as unrealistic as it is bold. To begin with, winning over 40 parliamentary seats as well as five states is a huge jump from PAS' current hold of 14 parliamentary seats and the control of one state, Kelantan. Secondly, PAS is a party that has just gone through a major split. This is bound to show cracks down the rank-and-file. Indeed, Hadi and other leaders still harbour suspicion about fence-sitters or sleeper supporters of Amanah they branded as *harumanis* - after the local mango, green on the outside, orange inside (also the colour of Amanah).

Thirdly, the new PAS strategy assumes some kind of peace pact with UMNO. But the possibility of the PAS rank-and-file revolting against Hadi cannot be ruled out if he goes all out to forge peace with UMNO. The PAS grassroots have been too conditioned to be anti-UMNO. A peace pact with UMNO may backfire and lead to a further split in PAS. This will certainly undermine the targets of winning 40 parliamentary seats and five states.

But while PAS is aiming high, the party's secret ambition really seems to be the new kingmaker in the Malaysian political landscape. If it succeeds in building up the third bloc that is neither with the current opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) nor the ruling UMNO, this will be the swing factor that will be decide which of the other two coalitions gets to form the next government.

This is a shrewd move because neither the BN nor the opposition PH will be strong enough to rule on their own. They will need the numbers to win the simple majority. Those numbers will come from the third bloc, or specifically from PAS. The five states that PAS hopes to win will in the end likely be a negotiated partnership government – PAS with UMNO, or PAS with PKR, or PAS with the Mahathir-led Bersatu - than a state led solely by PAS, as in Kelantan now.

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