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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Reforming PAS: From Islamism to Post-Islamism**

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THE 2008 Malaysian general election marked a new beginning for Malaysian politics. The opposition parties' strong showing may lead to an end to the political career of Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. The election results will also have a significant impact on the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). PAS' decision to moderate its Islamic stance seems to have improved its support amongst non-Muslims while proving to be successful in recapturing the support of rural Malay voters. It seems that PAS has finally resolved the dilemma of retaining its support in the Malay heartland and yet remain relevant at the national level. This new development is likely to reshape PAS over the next few years.

### **PAS' Electoral Success**

The 2008 general election saw a resurgence of the party. PAS captured 23 parliamentary seats and 82 states seats. It has formed the state government in Kelantan on its own and in coalition with other opposition parties in Kedah and Perak. While PAS' electoral success is less impressive than in the 1999 elections when it won 27 parliamentary seats and 98 state seats, its current performance is significant in several ways. Firstly, PAS has been able to garner significant support from non-Muslim Malaysians in the current elections. PAS' victory in several constituencies with significant non-Muslim voters, such as in the Titiwangsa parliamentary seat in the Federal Territory, is a manifestation of this. Secondly, PAS was able to maintain support amongst the rural Malay voters, successfully defending its control over Kelantan, wresting control of Kedah and making inroads in the state of Trengganu. Thirdly, PAS was able recapture support amongst urban Malay voters by winning Malay dominated seats in states like Selangor and Penang. PAS' success could be attributed to several factors.

## PAS's Islam versus UMNO's Islam

As part of its electoral strategy, PAS has softened its stance and left its Islamic state agenda on the backburner. Instead, its electoral manifesto was the formation of a *negara kebajikan* (welfare state). PAS' strategy was to focus on the more universal aspects of Islam such as egalitarianism, tolerance and accommodation. This strategy paid off when many non-Muslims decided to throw their lot with PAS in the elections.

Beyond the rhetoric of electoral politics, PAS has consistently de-coupled religion from ethnicity, a relationship enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution which defines Malays as Muslims. Since the 1980s, with emergence of the ulama leadership in the party, PAS has condemned UMNO's brand of racial politics as *assabiyah* (tribalism) which it deems as unIslamic. PAS' brand of Islamic piety has always been divorced from the trappings of Malay supremacist ideas that are couched in UMNO's approach to Islam.

This could explain why PAS is more tolerant of the religious and cultural practices of minority groups in Malaysia. Non-Muslim Malaysians find it easier to obtain permits to build their places of worship in PAS-controlled Kelantan than in UMNO-controlled states. With the right packaging, PAS leaders have successfully sold their more benevolent leadership to the non-Muslim voters in this general election.

## Malay Voters and Islamisation

In its efforts to capture Malay votes in the northern Malay states of Kelantan, Kedah, Perlis and Trengganu, PAS has traditionally emphasised its agenda to implement stricter Islamic laws. While it has been assumed that such a stance will result in the party winning a larger portion of the rural Malay votes, such assumptions have been shattered in the 2008 elections.

Without focusing on the Islamic state issue, PAS was still able to secure votes in the northern Malay states, retaining Kelantan, capturing Kedah and making inroads in Trengganu. The message is clear and simple. The Malay voters prefer to have leaders that have stronger Islamic credentials and are regarded as free from the corruption and nepotistic practices that are perceived as defining UMNO politicians. Yet, they are not necessarily keen for stricter Islamic laws to be implemented. This can be explained by the fact that Islam in northern Malaysia remains traditional and is fused with local Malay traditions, some of which may even contravene strict puritan Islamic laws that some PAS leaders are pushing for.

At the same time, many are wary that various forms of entertainment such as music would be banned if PAS comes to power in their state. PAS leaders successfully eased these worries when they began showing a more human side of the party when its leaders played soccer against Malaysian artistes and allowed Mawi, a popular Malay singer to perform in Kelantan. The urban Malay voters were also won over by PAS' new image, resulting in the party doing extremely well in many urban Malay-dominated constituencies in Selangor and Penang. The dilemma that PAS thought it faced is not a dilemma after all; it has finally successfully strengthened its position amongst Malay and non-Malay voters.

## The Way Forward for PAS

PAS' strong electoral showing is likely to strengthen the reform-minded faction in the party led by its deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa. During the last PAS Annual General Assembly, the more conservative ulama group within the party made a strong showing by capturing several top posts in the party. Yet the ulama themselves would probably moderate their position on the Islamic state issue now

given the success of the party in the 8 March 2008 general election. Should this happen, it could well lead to a discernible moderation in the Islamist commitment of the party.

PAS is likely to transform itself into a "post-Islamist" party similar to the Prosperity Justice Party (AKP) in Turkey. This approach may lead the party to totally forego its pledge to implement strict Islamic laws in the country. Instead, it would focus on the more egalitarian aspects of Islam such as social justice, protecting human rights and establishing a corruption-free political system. This will also allow the party to work more effectively with its political partners, the People's Justice Party (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) to establish a strong alternative front to the current government led by the National Front (BN).

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