

PAS reactionaries strike back
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COMMENT With emotional outbursts, walkouts and contradictory statements, PAS' 60th muktamar last week was more of a confrontation rather than a celebration.

With the PAS president referring to the Islamic party's Pakatan Rakyat partners as "minor enemies" and its members who stood with ally PKR as "lackeys", it has become evident that PAS under the leadership of Abdul Hadi Awang appears to be no longer a party that can be trusted to listen to the people and work with other parties to bring change to Malaysia.

There is a sense of betrayal among the public, whose hopes have been dashed by a reactionary faction of conservative ulama within PAS who think they are the 'chosen ones' - many of whom who have acted in a manner that is neither in keeping with their religious values nor reflects wisdom.

In the wake of this muktamar, where the reactionary forces have dominated the bitter discourse, the Pakatan coalition has suffered a serious blow from within. It appears that the opposition coalition is over.

This conclusion is understandable but - for now - premature.

Pakatan is clearly deeply wounded, but the intensity of the battle inside PAS reveals an ongoing struggle that suggests that there are many more battles ahead and the fight to develop an alternative political narrative is not over.

In fact, arguably, the PAS muktamar reveals the scope of struggles that are necessary to overcome in order to give the majority of Malaysians what they have voted for - a better Malaysia.

In this muktamar, the divide within PAS has come into the open. The skirmishes have been ongoing for many years, repeating historical tensions inside the party and paralleling struggles within Islamist parties globally.

PAS has moved from a pattern of working toward consensus - even this was fragile - to open conflict. Those that are the most insecure, the conservative religious ulama, have taken to the reactionary tactic of destruction, aiming to derail political reform within PAS itself and nationally.

Most of the focus of the discussion has centred on Abdul Hadi Awang. The underlying issues facing the party go well beyond its president. There are three interrelated crises facing the party - identity, leadership and democracy. Let me elaborate these further.

PAS identity - in Umno's image?

PAS' political advantage has traditionally been that its leaders are portrayed as moral and non-corrupt. This 'upright' standing has allowed the party to be compared favourably to Umno. It has underscored the profound respect for spiritual leader Niz Aziz Nik Mat, for example, whose missing moral authority was keenly felt at the Johor muktamar. But PAS' righteous advantage is disappearing.

Rightly or wrongly, PAS' response in the Selangor MB crisis has caused many to question the honesty and integrity of its leaders. Double-speak, contradictions and inconsistencies - in direct contrast to the theme of the muktamar - have left a mark on party's image.

PAS has always had a trust deficit among the majority of the country; it only managed to win on average a third of support among Malaysians on its own. The actions over the last few months have deepened distrust and, for many non-Muslims and Muslims alike, shattered the perception of PAS as the 'good' party.

People are asking why PAS leaders have misled the public, visited certain places in the shadow of night and avoided answering questions directly. In the wake of the muktamar, PAS has come off as a party interested in its own power, not listening to the public nor apparently keeping its promises. Has PAS taken a page from Umno, many wonder?

In fact, while scholars point to Umno becoming like PAS in its advocacy of exclusionary Islamist policies, there has been another phenomenon, PAS - or at least some within the party - is becoming more like Umno.

This perception is reinforced by a closer look at the backgrounds of PAS leaders. Gone are the days of humility and humbleness. Today many PAS leaders appear to be interested in securing international positions, wealth and material goods. The sins of greed and pride appear evident.

Observers are asking how religious schools led by some PAS leaders have amassed such wealth, while others secured lucrative business contracts. Questions are being raised about the ties of many PAS leaders with those from Umno over assets and finances.

Corruption and nepotism within PAS are even being quietly discussed in the sense that some are using the party for position, their families and personal wealth rather than the ideals the party supposedly espouses. Worse yet, religion is being used to justify positions that appear to be more about self-interest rather than actual religious principles.

For decades, PAS has been wrestling with how to promote an Islamist agenda and what sort of Islam it should be advocating. As it engaged in a more inclusive manner through Pakatan, the myopic focus on implementing hudud and syariah laws has been challenged by more inclusive shared religious values of justice, good governance and stronger humanity.

A spirit of humanism and community has been fostered, where greater inclusiveness and appreciation for equality have disputed the narrow-minded thinking of many conservative ulama that see themselves a step above ordinary people.

Many conservative ulama within the party are uncomfortable moving outside of what they know, and in fact have increased their efforts to indoctrinate younger members with their interpreted religious views. They advocate an exclusionary approach that not only divides Malaysian society, but also follows the line of dictating to others.

They just don't get that the overwhelming majority of Malaysians want to choose how they practice their own religion, and that the majority believe that the country is not ready for hudud.

Moreover, they do not realise that citizens are not willing to turn over moral authority to religious leaders that appear to be acting immorally. PAS' conservative ulama appear to have forgotten that the means are as important as the ends, and by choosing to adopt practices that promote division and disrespect they are not acting righteously.

Sadly, of late, a path of destruction has been adopted by Hadi and his ulama camp against their professed goals. The message that stands out is not only one of further parallel to Umno in the prominence of arrogance and use of division, but it is also a signal that ironically strengthens Umno as the choice for government over the long term.

Crisis of leadership

Malaysians have been searching for leaders they can respect and put their faith in. More and more have been putting their belief in PAS. But this muktamar has not inspired any such confidence.

Rather than working together to move the country forward, PAS under Hadi appears to want to move the country and his party backward. When Hadi assumed the presidency in 2002, he had difficult shoes to fill following the death of Fadzil Noor. Not only was the former president willing to listen and work with others, he inspired support that brought new people into the party and won additional states to govern.

By any measure Hadi cannot be credited with the same gains, especially in recent months. Hadi's decisions contributed to the loss of Kedah, Terengganu (twice), Perak and potentially Selangor, and his leadership has weakened rather than strengthened the party.

The future of Hadi's leadership will continue to play out until the next muktamar when a party election is scheduled. The rally-around-the-leader dynamic of this muktamar was as much a reflection of weakness of Hadi's leadership as it shows that many within his own party are alienated by his actions.

The leadership problem in PAS is broader than one person. One dimension is the role of the ulama in the party hierarchy. Many in PAS do not agree that the conservative ulama should

lead the party. It is a long-standing battle in PAS, and this battle has intensified.

Until this muktamar, the conservative ulama have been losing ground. Conservative ulama have played limited roles in Pakatan, with many of them not even attending decision-making meetings. The ulama leadership in states like Kedah was rejected by the electorate.

The key PAS actors involved in successful Pakatan governance have been those with the direct skills and knowledge to address the country's problems, the non-ulama. The party delegates and general public understand this. In last year's muktamar, progressives were elected in the majority for positions, as the delegates opted for more non-ulama leadership.

The conservative ulama fear marginalisation and in this muktamar fought back. They defended the decisions and positions of their teammate Hadi who has increasingly taken on less reform-oriented positions.

The conservative ulama clearly are unwilling to accept a different and more advisory political role. The recent meeting shows that they are willing to do anything to stay in premier positions, even if it means dividing PAS and weakening the opposition as a whole.

Painting themselves as martyrs for the conservative cause, the current ulama are seen to be trying to assure the survival of younger conservatives, many of whom are from the same families of the current ulama leadership. At its root is a reactionary goal - to stop reforms in the party and nationally.

A second leadership problem is that PAS currently does not offer a viable prime minister candidate. This has to do in part with the competition among the more progressive leaders among themselves. It also stems for a lack of grooming and experience of many PAS leaders in government and on the national stage.

For a party that supposedly claims to seek national power, it has a deficit in giving voters an alternative that can not only lead the country but also inspire confidence. While there are many PAS leaders that have potential to fill this role, the current situation and traditional PAS party culture of accepting hierarchy has prevented them from coming to the fore.

If the progressives are to have any chance at all they will need to agree and present an alternative leader. This will require significant reform within PAS, and successful measures involving courage that thwart the reactionary turn.

Moving away from democracy

A third interrelated dimension of PAS' current crises involves democracy. PAS is grappling with the conflict between different political bodies within the party, namely the syura council versus the central working committee.

It is wrestling also to respond to an increasingly demanding and diverse membership and electorate. In recent months, the PAS ulama leadership has moved in a more authoritarian direction, with decisions by fiat rather than through consultation.

In fact, minority views have prevailed, as the majority were ignored, dismissed and even ridiculed. Clearly, the mandate of the delegates and voters has been ignored. The conservative ulama appear not to understand that dictatorial practices lead to the downfall of Islamist parties, as happened in Egypt. They similarly do not understand that as an opposition party calling for more democracy, their own lack of democratic governance reveals hypocrisy.

PAS, like other parties, wrestles with engaging democratic practices. As Umno and PKR have introduced more democratic internal party elections, allowing members to select the party leadership, under Hadi PAS has resisted opening up. This has not allowed new blood to come into the leadership and different ideas to emerge. It has signaled a lack of respect for the wisdom of its members.

Another challenge has been including women in political positions within PAS. The party leadership's recent attacks on a politician - although not everyone in PAS - because she is a woman, has not conformed to democratic values of inclusion.

Equally important, members in PAS have been supporting decisions that are not in line with the public mandate on who was voted into office and why. Unlike a decade ago where PAS was leading the path toward democracy in the Malay community, the Islamist party has stagnated in expanding democracy. In this muktamar, the reactionary conservative ulama have further resisted democratic reforms.

An example is the supremacy of the syura council in party decisions. Syura members have the undemocratic power to choose their members and they are not accountable to anyone. Is this the type of body that Malaysians are willing to accept to wield ultimate decision-making power and those who assume positions not from an open election?

Who should have power and whether that power should be accountable to the delegates and ordinary voters has come to the fore.

This involves the difficult issue of legitimacy. Who should legitimately hold power? How should leaders be chosen by the people? What should be the source of legitimate power is right for PAS? Should it be the party constitution, elections from members or archaic practices of a syura council that is neither representative to the party itself or appears willing to respect and listen to the views and aspirations of ordinary voters?

Reforms to the party constitution will be necessary if the party is to move in a more democratic direction. The reactionary push-back in PAS has resisted these democratic pressures. More broadly, the party's authoritarian turn had been damaging for democracy in Malaysia.

Difficult future for Pakatan

The reactionary elements in PAS have been there for decades. In this muktamar, they have come out into the open. The intensity of their responses reflects ongoing struggles over identity, leadership and democracy.

The fact that they have come out as they have, fighting in a no-holds-barred manner, reveals weakness not strength. They are afraid and insecure. They are willing to do everything to stay in control of PAS to maintain their reactionary position.

The use of reactionary politics is sadly increasingly common across the political spectrum in Umno as well as PAS. Its roots however have to be seen to derive from the increasing democratic pressures and demands from the public on leaders who are neither willing nor able to accommodate them.

The fact that more of these reactionary measures are being used shows that Malaysia is changing and those in power are unwilling to change with it.

PAS is headed for further internal struggles. The more progressive forces in the party may appear to have lost ground at this muktamar, with reactionary forces dominating the discourse. They clearly were not prepared to fight openly against the reactionary forces. But they have survived to fight another day, and the party election in the next muktamar as well as the Selangor issue will be the next battlefields.

The muktamar showed that the internal battles will continue to rage, and that the fight within PAS is far from over. The important decision ahead for the progressives in PAS involve whether or not to stay within the party, the development of strategies that strengthen internal party reform and movement toward offering an alternative leader to Hadi.

What does this mean for Pakatan? Is it dead as many have claimed? No question, the working relationships of leaders and partnerships have soured, and will likely to continue. The opposition coalition may enter a period of decline. As long as the reactionaries control the party decisions in PAS, the Islamist party will not be seen as a trusted partner. This will feed distrust among the opposition parties.

Pakatan's future will heavily depend on the outcome of the battles within PAS. It is important at this juncture not to completely dismiss PAS and the reality of the difficulty of its internal struggles. Indeed, the battle for democracy in the Malay community is taking place on many fronts.

It also needs to be acknowledged that PAS alone is not responsible for all the troubles in Pakatan and considerable responsibility lies with the folly of the 'Kajang move' and inflexibility of other Pakatan leaders in the handling the Selangor crisis. PAS' Pakatan partners need to look inside themselves to appreciate why reactionary forces in PAS have become so predominant.

Pakatan now enters its most difficult phase and this will decide whether the coalition will survive and the struggle for political reform is a genuine one. It will involve courage, faith and wisdom. One decisive factor ahead will be the willingness of leaders across the opposition coalition to learn lessons from Selangor and set in place measures that offset the damaging cycle that has emerged.

Current conditions suggest this is not yet promising. People are increasingly losing confidence in Pakatan and words will not be enough. What will matter is whether the opposition remembers why it is in office in the first place - to serve the people.

Malaysians want results and solutions to problems rather than politicking that results in more problems. The time now is for reflection, not reaction or 'reactionarism', and a return to respecting the mandate that made the Pakatan coalition a reality in the first place.

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