



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Unifier of the *Ummah*?

Wan Saiful Wan Jan

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PARTI ISLAM SEMALAYSIA (PAS)

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS): Unifier of the *Ummah*?

By Wan Saiful Wan Jan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) is no stranger to coalition politics. It has a long history of working with others, both in government and in opposition. Up until 2018, it used the framework of *tahaluf siyasi* as the guide to forming coalitions.
- Under the pretext of *tahaluf siyasi* or political coalition, PAS joined the Barisan Nasional (BN) government in 1974. It was also a key player in the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (APU), Barisan Alternatif (BA) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) opposition coalitions.
- But in the lead up to GE14, PAS decided to form the Gagasan Sejahtera coalition with much smaller parties—Berjasa and Ikatan. It dominated this coalition and the two partners were largely insignificant.
- After GE14, PAS decided to partner with UMNO in Muafakat Nasional, under the pretext of a new strategy called *ta'awun siyasi* or political cooperation. This is a looser partnership arrangement, in which the partners are not strictly bound to each other.
- The formation of Muafakat Nasional is a historic development, as it brings together the two biggest and oldest Malay political parties for the time in an exclusive manner. Bersatu joined the pact in 2020, making Muafakat Nasional the biggest Malay political force in Malaysia today.
- PAS sees its role as a unifier of the Muslim *umma*, holding and keeping the peace between UMNO and Bersatu. For PAS, creating Malay Muslim unity is not just an effective political strategy but also a religious obligation.

Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS): Unifier of the *Ummah*?

By Wan Saiful Wan Jan¹

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) traces its history to 1951, when it was set up by a group of religious scholars many of whom were from the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Since its establishment, the party has developed a rich history both in government and in opposition. In Malay-majority states such as Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah, PAS has a strong support base. Indeed, they are currently the lead party in these states' administration, with a comfortable majority in the legislative assemblies. In Kelantan and Terengganu, PAS can rule without the need for support from any other party. Additionally, as part of a coalition, PAS also has experience in governing richer and more cosmopolitan states such as Penang and Selangor.

At the federal level today, PAS has eighteen MPs with unquestioned loyalty to the party. There is virtually no popular discussion about the possibility of any PAS MP crossing over to another party. In 2019, PAS formed a partnership with UMNO under the banner of Muafakat Nasional. It then agreed to join the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition with eleven other parties, to form a new government following the resignation of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in February 2020. The support of PAS MPs was instrumental in the downfall of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government and the formation of the PN government. And their continued participation in the government is crucial, for without them the government would fall.

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The approach taken in this study is to explain the subject by using PAS' own views to justify and explain its actions and strategies. The aim is not to assess or judge the party, but to capture and document its stance in a coherent fashion. Since there has been so much movement in Malaysian politics of late, it is important to keep in mind that this study covers the period up to the end of September 2020 only.

The next section provides a brief background of the party. The essay will then explore some of the major decisions made by the party in recent years, focusing in depth on its attitude towards political partnerships with other parties. PAS' participation in both Muafakat Nasional and PN will be discussed. The essay will also delve into how PAS reconciles partnering with their archrival UMNO in the fight against PH, and how they see their role in Muafakat Nasional and PN.

BACKGROUND OF PAS

PAS was founded in 1951 following two national meetings of Islamic religious scholars, first in Kuala Lumpur and then in Penang. The conventions brought together conservative Muslim scholars to discuss ways by which they could contribute to the fight for Malaya's independence from the British. Their conclusion was to set up PAS, originally designed to be a conservative Malay nationalist party, but distinguishing itself from the more dominant UMNO by having an Islamist ideology. It can also be argued that PAS was an offshoot from UMNO since many of its early members had dual membership in both parties.² From the start, PAS envisioned an independent country that had Islam as its core ethos and the shariah law as the basis for her legal system.

At the federal level, PAS participated in all general elections since the first one in 1955. In the 1955 general election, PAS won just

² For a more detailed discussion on the ideological evolution of PAS, see Wan Saiful Wan Jan, "Islamism in Malaysian Politics: The Splintering of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and the Spread of Progressive Ideas", *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 9, no. 4 (October 2018): 128–53.

1 out of the 52 contested seats. It performed better in the 1959 general election, winning 13 out of the 104 seats. But thereafter, its influence waned until its worst performance in 1986 when it won just 1 seat. The party's best electoral performance was in 1999, when it won 27 seats in the federal parliament. This was at the peak of the *Reformasi* anti-government confrontations, and PAS benefitted from its partnership with other opposition parties in the Barisan Alternatif coalition at the time. This coalition fragmented soon after the 2004 general election, in which PAS only managed to win 7 seats. PAS then found new strengths in the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) opposition coalition, enabling them to win 23 seats in the 2008 general election, and 21 in 2013. Yet despite the relatively healthy number of seats following the 2013 general election, a significant internal split occurred in 2015 which resulted in the departure of a group of more progressive leaders from the party to form a splinter Islamist party—Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah). This episode will be briefly discussed in the next section.³

PAS made an unexpected strategic change in the 14th general election in 2018—more commonly dubbed as GE14. While almost all other parties prepared for GE14 by joining or forming coalitions, PAS opted to mainly contest alone, without being part of any major coalition. The party did form the Gagasan Sejahtera coalition but this was with smaller and rather insignificant parties, namely Berjasa and Ikatan. PAS contested in 155 seats and won 18. PAS' partners, Berjasa and Ikatan contested in 3 seats and 1 seat, respectively, but lost in all. This too will be examined further in the next section.

In terms of states, traditionally PAS has been more successful in the Malay-dominated states of Kelantan and Terengganu. In the 1959 elections, PAS won the governments of both these states. Its government in Terengganu crumbled in 1961, however, and Kelantan also fell in 1977.

³ For a more detailed discussion, see Wan Saiful Wan Jan, "Emergence of Progressive Islamism in Malaysia", in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Modernity*, edited by Norshahril Saat (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), pp. 13–34.

PAS won back Kelantan in 1990 and then Terengganu in 1999. Although their rule in Terengganu lasted only a term, until 2004, the party remains the government in Kelantan till this day. The party also has a significant presence in Kedah. In 2008, PAS led the Kedah PR coalition to win the state government. Although PAS did not win in Kedah in 2013 and 2018, it is now back in power in the state as a result of the government change in February 2020,⁴ this time in partnership with Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) and UMNO. In GE14, all the 18 PAS MPs came from these 3 states, with 9 from Kelantan, 6 from Terengganu, and 3 from Kedah.

PAS AND COALITION POLITICS

Tahaluf Siyasi

In the earlier years, PAS stood alone in elections. Although they campaigned with other opposition parties—such as with Parti Negara between 1954 and 1962—but these were ad hoc partnerships in specific activities or locations, and not formal alliances at the national level.

PAS' first attempt at formal national coalition was in 1973 when it agreed to join the UMNO-led Parti Perikatan coalition (not to be confused with the newly formed Perikatan Nasional coalition) in the federal government. This evolved into PAS working with eight other parties—UMNO, MCA, MIC, PPP, Gerakan, SUPP, PBB and Sabah Alliance Party—to formally establish Barisan Nasional (BN) in 1974 as a registered party whose membership consists of individual parties. Being a founding member of the BN coalition, PAS' president at that time, Asri Muda, was appointed BN's first Treasurer while UMNO's President Abdul Razak Hussein was Chairman.⁵ In the 1974 general

⁴ Further description of the change of government can be found in Wan Saiful Wan Jan, *Why Did Bersatu Leave Pakatan Harapan*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 10/20 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020).

⁵ Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), p. 147.

election, BN won handsomely, securing 135 of the 154 parliamentary seats, with PAS contributing 13 seats to be part of the government. However, trouble started brewing for the BN coalition not long after its 1974 victory. In 1977, PAS had a major disagreement with other BN partners, especially with UMNO, on the issue of how to deal with a political crisis in Kelantan.⁶ This resulted in PAS being expelled from BN in December 1977.

The saga did not deter PAS from forming new coalitions. Having seen how they could widen their reach and influence by being in the BN coalition, the party understood that being in a coalition was important for its progress. Thus, as an opposition party after its BN years, PAS actively sought to form partnerships with other opposition parties. In 1990 PAS formed Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (APU) together with four other parties, namely Semangat 46, Berjasa, Hamim, and Kimma. Another opposition coalition—Gagasan Rakyat—also existed parallel to the APU. PAS refused to join Gagasan Rakyat since its long-time enemy, the Democratic Action Party (DAP)—regarded by PAS as a non-Muslim party that promotes anti-Islam agenda—was a key player in the coalition. But three parties in APU—Semangat 46, Hamim and Kimma—were also members of Gagasan Rakyat.⁷ In an interview with this author, Mustafa Ali, Chairman of PAS Advisory Council stated that being in the APU was an interesting situation for PAS because they worked “indirectly with the DAP through Semangat 46 and other partners in APU who were also in Gagasan Rakyat. Although our members were not ready to work with the DAP directly because the DAP opposes our Islamic agenda, we found a

⁶ PAS had an internal leadership crisis in Kelantan in 1977 which resulted in physical violence in several places. The federal government declared an emergency and took over the administration of the state. PAS disagreed with this move. When they protested, BN treated their actions as going against the coalition, culminating in their expulsion.

⁷ There were eight parties in Gagasan Rakyat: DAP, PBS, PRM, IPF, MSP, Semangat 46, Hamim and Kimma.

way to still create a united opposition front in order to achieve the greater good for our Islamic cause.”⁸ The APU coalition lasted for six years.

Upon the disbanding of APU, PAS in 1999 ventured into a new partnership with Parti Keadilan Nasional, DAP and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) under the banner of a new coalition, Barisan Alternatif (BA). This was a historic and very significant shift in strategy for PAS, as for the first time it agreed to enter into a formal coalition with the DAP, a mainly non-Muslim party they considered its arch-enemy for many years.⁹ PAS’ willingness to change its attitude towards the DAP created significant benefit as it won 27 seats in the 1999 general elections. This was the biggest number of seats that PAS had ever won in the Malaysian Parliament. It also very comfortably won the state governments in Kelantan and Terengganu, with 41 out of 43 state seats in the former and 28 out of 32 seats in the latter. Interestingly, the DAP paid a heavy price for being in this coalition; they won only 10 parliamentary seats and their top two leaders—Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh—lost.

Perhaps due to its relatively large victory, PAS was accused of being overzealous in implementing its Islamic agenda. For example, in Terengganu it proposed to introduce the *kharaj*¹⁰ tax for non-Muslims, while at the same time it pushed through the Shariah Criminal Offences (Hudud and Qisas) Enactment in both Terengganu and Kelantan.¹¹ This resulted in its BA coalition partners feeling alienated. The DAP was the most vocal, especially after it had to pay such a heavy price for being in a coalition with PAS, leading to the party eventually leaving BA in 2001 in protest against PAS’ overt steps towards Islamization. The impact was

⁸ Interview with Mustafa Ali, Chairman of PAS Advisory Council and former Secretary General of the party, 24 June 2020.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Kharaj* is a land tax imposed by an Islamic government on non-Muslim subjects.

¹¹ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, “The Islamic Opposition in Malaysia: New Trajectories and Directions?”, Working Papers Series, No. 151 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2008).

seen in the 2004 general election, when the opposition could not present a united front against the BN. In that general election, the opposition seats dropped significantly, with PAS itself winning only 7 seats, a big drop from its previous 27 seats.

Learning from the 2004 catastrophic results, PAS decided to bite the bullet and work again with the DAP, as well as Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR),¹² to form the PR coalition in 2008. But PR was established in a rather different way compared to its predecessors. The coalition started as an unofficial loose coordination initially between PKR and DAP, and then later with PAS, prior to the 2008 general election. The aim was to ensure minimal overlaps in the seats they contested, even though a formal pact was not yet formed. For a very brief period, the name Barisan Rakyat was used to refer to this loose grouping.

A more formal coalition was only formed several weeks after the general election. One factor that pushed the parties to refresh their partnership as PR and set it up in a formal fashion was “the distribution of state seats in the states where the BN failed to win a majority in the state legislature after the 2008 general election necessitated the cooperation of all three major opposition parties in Peninsular Malaysia. With the exception of Kelantan, no one opposition party could, on its own, govern the states of Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor.”¹³ Table 1 illustrates this point. Thus, PR was formed post-election, at least partly out of necessity to ensure that the parties could form a government in the respective states.

PR entered the 2013 general election as a stronger team with a more united message. The unity enabled it to win the popular vote by a slight margin over BN. This was the first time in Malaysian history that the BN suffered such a fate. But although PR may have won the popular vote,

¹² In 2003, Parti Keadilan Nasional merged with Parti Rakyat Malaysia to form Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR).

¹³ Ong Kian Ming, “Pakatan Rakyat: What Is Different This Time?”, *Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 99, no. 407 (2010): 141–52.

Table 1: Distribution of State Seats Among PKR, PAS and DAP in Kelantan, Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor Post General Election 2008

State	PKR	PAS	DAP	Total
Kelantan	1	37	0	38
Kedah	5	16	1	22
Penang	1	9	19	29
Perak	15	8	13	36
Selangor	15	8	13	36

Source: Ong Kian Ming, “Pakatan Rakyat: What Is Different This Time?”, *Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 99, no. 407 (2010): 141–52.

it was not able to form the government due to Malaysia’s first-past-the-post electoral system as well as gerrymandering and malapportionment of many parliamentary electoral boundaries. As stated by political analyst Wong Chin Huat, in the 2013 general election, BN “lost its majority in votes for the first time. Nevertheless, aided by excessive malapportionment and gerrymandering of constituencies ... BN retained a comfortable 60 per cent parliamentary majority despite winning only 47 per cent of votes.”¹⁴ However, PR still set a record by winning 89 seats, the highest ever achievement by a Malaysian opposition, with PAS contributing 21 seats.

Soon after the 2013 general election, trouble started to brew in PR when the relationship between PAS and DAP turned sour again. Unsurprisingly the debate this time too was on the role of Islam in government, especially the Islamic shariah law. Sensing the opportunity,

¹⁴ Wong Chin Huat, “Constituency Delimitation and Electoral Authoritarianism in Malaysia”, *Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 107, no. 1 (2018): 67–80.

UMNO took steps to court PAS, an episode which will be elaborated in the next section. It ultimately led to the DAP once again pulling out from the opposition coalition in 2015, paving the way for the demise of PR.

In the previous section, it has been stated that PAS made an important strategic change in the lead up to GE14. PAS decided to not join the newly formed PH coalition that brought together the other main opposition parties. Instead, PAS formed Gagasan Sejahtera with the much smaller parties Berjasa and Ikatan. PAS dominated the seat allocations by contesting in 155 seats, while their partners contested only 4 seats between them. PAS won 18 seats, but Berjasa and Ikatan did not win any seat. PAS' overwhelming dominance in Gagasan Sejahtera created the generally accepted view that in GE14, PAS' overall strategy was to contest alone. At a time when everybody else was looking for ways to form coalitions before the election—which is the norm in Malaysian politics—PAS' strategy baffled many observers. But it was an understandable choice for PAS because the presence of DAP in PH made the coalition unappealing to PAS supporters, while UMNO's presence in BN tainted the coalition with allegations of corruption and kleptocracy. Neither coalition was attractive to PAS.

The overview above shows that PAS is no stranger to coalition politics. PAS uses the Arabic term *tahaluf siyasi* to describe political coalitions. In reality, without going too much into details, *tahaluf siyasi* is just another term for coalition politics as practised by many parties in Malaysia and around the world. For PAS, forming, joining or leaving coalitions is “not a very big issue as *tahaluf siyasi* is a matter of strategy that is fluid and can change according to circumstances. We will be part of a coalition if it benefits Islam and our party, and we will leave the coalition if remaining is detrimental to Islam and our party.”¹⁵ This flexible *tahaluf siyasi* approach means PAS' loyalty “is only to Islam and our own cause”,¹⁶ thereby ensuring any partnership it signs into will help

¹⁵ Interview with Idris Ahmad, Vice President of PAS, 1 July 2020.

¹⁶ Ibid.

advance its own cause and it does not have to compromise more than what it feels is necessary.

PAS' journey from its first general election in 1955 to GE14 showed that the party has a tremendous ability to adapt and change strategy as and when necessary. It had worked alone and in coalitions, it had both fought against and worked with UMNO and DAP, and it had been in government as well as in opposition. Each time, its strategy and approach would change to suit the necessities of the time. By clearly looking at *tahaluf siyasi* as a matter of strategy rather than principle, it was able to move smoothly from one coalition to another as and when needed. There were challenges along the way, and these will be discussed below, but PAS has always been able to manage the transitions and maintain internal stability despite the changes.

Ta'awun Siyasi

It has been mentioned earlier that right after the 2013 general election, trouble started to brew internally within PR, especially between PAS and DAP. With the DAP being so strongly opposed to PAS' Islamization agenda, UMNO took the opportunity to court PAS by declaring that it no longer opposed the introduction of Islamic law. In 2014, UMNO announced that if PAS wanted to implement Islamic shariah criminal law in Kelantan, the Federal Government would not object. Thus, in 2015 the PAS-led Kelantan state government introduced several amendments to its already-existing Kelantan Shariah Criminal Code 1993, as preparation for implementation. Further, UMNO also opened the door for PAS' President Abdul Hadi Awang to table a Private Member's Bill in the Federal Parliament to amend the Shariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965—locally known as RUU 355—aimed at removing several hurdles that previously prevented full implementation of the Islamic shariah law in states. Although Hadi's Private Member's Bill was never passed, the fact that he could table it in Parliament was enough to create the intended goodwill between the two parties.

UMNO took several more steps to create a warmer relationship with PAS. In UMNO's General Assembly in December 2015, party president Najib Razak in his speech said that UMNO welcomed PAS

with open arms in the spirit of Muslim brotherhood. Najib and Hadi also appeared together at several big events, notably in December 2015 during a regional Islamic seminar themed “Muslim Unity Transcending Ideology” and then in December 2016 in a large Muslim rally in Kuala Lumpur to protest the violence against Rohingyas in Myanmar. In February 2017, when PAS held an RUU 355 rally in Kuala Lumpur to create public support for Hadi’s Private Member’s Bill, UMNO indicated its support by sending Supreme Council Member and Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department in charge of Islamic Affairs Jamil Khir Baharom to attend.

The UMNO-PAS courtship eventually bore fruit when in 2018, after PH’s victory in GE14, PAS announced a new type of partnership called *ta’awun siyasi* or political cooperation—rather than *tahaluf* or coalition—with UMNO. Although for decades PAS had positioned UMNO as its arch-nemesis, this changed following the several years of them courting each other. The friendship between PAS and UMNO became stronger following the historic change of government in GE14, which put both UMNO and PAS in the opposition. Equally important is the fact that with both being in the opposition, not only were they both fighting PH, they also have a common bigger enemy namely DAP who was then in the PH government. Thus, PAS and UMNO gradually worked even closer together to challenge the ruling PH. The cooperation started as early as two months after GE14, in the preparation for a state constituency by-election in Sungai Kandis, Selangor. UMNO Deputy President Muhamad Hassan announced on 31 July 2018 that several negotiations had been held between UMNO and PAS, and PAS had agreed “for the first time ... that it is an obligation for PAS members ... to support UMNO in Sungai Kandis.”¹⁷ PAS subsequently did not put up a candidate in the by-election and asked their members to assist UMNO instead.

¹⁷ <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/politik/2018/07/455894/prk-sungai-kandis-titik-permulaan-persefahaman-umno-pas> (accessed 5 July 2020).

The partnership between the two parties became stronger as they continued to campaign together in subsequent by-elections. This culminated in the formalization of the cooperation with the signing of a charter to form Muafakat Nasional on 14 September 2019. The charter outlines five agenda for the cooperation, namely that both parties will seek to: (i) defend the Federal Constitution especially on matters related to Islam and the special position of the Malays; (ii) strengthen cooperation through cordial negotiations; (iii) enhance the Islam, Malay and bumiputra agenda; (iv) position Islam and the Malays as the core of Malaysia's diverse population; and (v) work together to develop a "new offer" for Malaysia. (See Appendix for the full charter in Malay.)

The Muafakat Nasional charter by itself is not an overly exciting document. On the surface, it contains merely broad statements of intent that basically any party can claim to subscribe to easily. But the impact of the charter is immensely significant to Malaysia's politics. It brought together the two oldest and largest Malay parties which had never worked exclusively together before. When PAS worked with UMNO in BN during 1973 to 1977, it was a partnership with many other parties. But this time, it is just the two parties. The formation of Muafakat Nasional is arguably the most significant coming together of Malay political interests since independence, creating the biggest Malay political force in the country up to date.

At the start of the cooperation, PAS felt that working with UMNO in Muafakat Nasional was a highly risky venture. As stated above, for decades it had trained its members to see UMNO as its main rival. Managing the transition towards working together was expected to be very tricky because the possibility of rejection by its members was assumed to be high.¹⁸ But, in late 2018 when it was assessing the risks, it came to believe that if cooperation with UMNO turned out to be successful, the electoral gains would be great. PAS believed that if its election machinery was combined with that of UMNO, the two parties together would win almost 100 parliamentary seats if not more in the

¹⁸ Interview with Idris Ahmad, 1 July 2020.

upcoming GE15, and they could also win all states bar one—Penang—in Peninsular Malaysia.¹⁹ That meant that through Muafakat Nasional the possibility of wresting control of the federal government and/or becoming part of government in many more states in Peninsular Malaysia was much higher. Thus, the party decided to take a carefully calculated risk and marched ahead with Muafakat Nasional.

The nature of PAS' cooperation—*ta'awun*—in Muafakat Nasional is different from its previous partnerships. *Ta'awun* is a looser cooperation compared to *tahaluf*. It is an agreement for PAS to work with a partner on a common agenda but partners are not compelled to agree with each other on all issues. Where there are disagreements, parties are free to champion their own causes without breaking the electoral pact. *Ta'awun* also does not exclude the possibility of the party working with other partners separately at the same time, including with those who are seen as rivals to their partners. This approach creates flexibility for PAS—as well as for UMNO—as they are not constrained to regard the political enemies (or friends) of their *ta'awun* counterparts as their political enemies (or friends) as well.²⁰

PERIKATAN NASIONAL: UNITING MUSLIMS AND MALAYS

PAS' openness to working with multiple parties at the same time invited strong criticism from several quarters. The main accusation is that PAS is unprincipled, willing to befriend whoever can bring them closer to power.²¹ But for PAS, the *ta'awun* strategy presents them with an unprecedented opportunity to “bring the message of Islam to a much

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interview with Idris Ahmad, 1 July 2020, and, Closing Speech by Abdul Hadi Awang, PAS President, at the party's annual general meeting (Muktamar), 13 September 2020.

²¹ See, for example, comment by Mahfuz Omar, Vice-President of Amanah, <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/46719/BERITA/Politik/Mahfuz-ucap-selamat-pengantin-baru-Pas-UMNO>

bigger audience than we have been able to before. Now by being in Muafakat Nasional even UMNO is willing to listen to us.”²² In analysing PAS’ strategy, this line of thinking is an important one to appreciate since it sheds light on how PAS views itself not merely as a political party but more importantly as a platform to propagate Islam, or, in the widely used Arabic terms, for *da’wah*. Thus, by placing itself as a friend and ally of UMNO, it expects to be able to convey Islam to UMNO more easily than when they were foes.

Perhaps a bigger agenda is PAS’ desire to foster unity among Muslims (*kesatuan ummah*) in Malaysia. Several PAS leaders have been promoting the idea of working with UMNO under the banner of Muslim unity for many years, but they were not able to bring it to fruition. For example, the topic was hotly debated within PAS for several years prior to the 2013 general election. At that time, among the lead campaigners for PAS to work with UMNO were then Deputy President Nasharudin Mat Isa and then central committee member Hassan Ali. However, at that time many influential PAS leaders—including the highly respected spiritual leader Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat—strongly rejected any attempt to work with UMNO, even under the pretext of Muslim unity. The rejection was so strong that both Nasharudin and Hassan were eventually expelled from the party.²³

Despite the expulsion of the two figures, their Muslim unity idea not only remained in the party but gained strength. The Malay unity movement gained more traction upon the demise of Nik Abdul Aziz in February 2015. In the same year, almost all leaders of the faction that fiercely opposed the call to partner with UMNO lost badly in PAS’ internal party election. This group ended up leaving PAS to form a new Islamist splinter party called Amanah.²⁴ Their departure paved the way for the

²² Interview with Khairil Nizam Khirudin, PAS Youth Chief, 1 September 2020.

²³ <https://www.mstar.com.my/lokal/semasa/2013/01/31/nasharuddin-bukan-lagi-ahli-pas--nik-aziz> (accessed 19 July 2020).

²⁴ A more detailed explanation can be found in Wan Saiful Wan Jan, *Parti Amanah Negara in Johor: Birth, Challenges, and Prospects*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 9/2017 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017).

Muslim unity idea to not just re-emerge but to very quickly become the dominant view in the party. Not only the opponents had left the party, the proponents now represented it as a religious obligation, since as a *da'wah* organization PAS had a religious duty to bring all Malays and Muslims into one big family.²⁵

It is with that spirit that, after forming Muafakat Nasional with UMNO, PAS ventured into another *ta'awun* arrangement with another Malay party, Bersatu. The new partnership, PN, was formed in February 2020 upon the demise of the PH government, bringing together twelve political parties to form the federal government that succeeded PH. PAS with eighteen MPs is the third biggest Malay party in the government, after UMNO and Bersatu. True to the concept of *ta'awun* that allows multiple parallel partnerships, PAS joined PN while still a member of Muafakat Nasional. This move was rather easy to make at the beginning because UMNO too decided to join PN. But confusion started to creep in within a few months of PN's formation, especially when UMNO leaders found it challenging to convince their members about the benefits of entering formal longer-term cooperation with Bersatu through PN.

To understand this challenge, it is necessary to briefly segue into the nature of the UMNO-Bersatu relationship. Following the sacking of then UMNO Deputy President Muhyiddin Yassin and then Supreme Council Member Mukhriz Mahathir, the two invited former President of UMNO Mahathir Mohamad to spearhead the formation of Bersatu in 2016. The main theme used by Bersatu in their GE14 campaign was that they were fighting against the corrupt and kleptocratic UMNO. It is therefore “natural for UMNO to feel uneasy about Bersatu because just three years ago, Bersatu had gone around the country accusing its members of being thieves and robbers. The hurt still exists and there has not been sufficient time for the wound to heal.”²⁶

In such a situation, PAS sees itself as the bridge that links UMNO with Bersatu. Without PAS, there would be no one playing the peacemaker

²⁵ Interview with Khairil Nizam Khirudin, 1 September 2020.

²⁶ Interview with Idris Ahmad, 1 July 2020.

role, and this could lead to the collapse of not just the PN coalition but also the PN government.²⁷ The approach is akin to the situation in the 1990s when PAS refused to work with the DAP, while PAS's partners in APU—Semangat 46, Hamim and Kimma—were also members of Gagasan Rakyat together with DAP. At that time, the three parties provided a bridge between PAS and DAP. Now, although the relationship between Bersatu and UMNO is not as antagonistic as the relationship between PAS and DAP was in the 1990s, PAS regards itself as “the glue that binds the Malay parties and we will do our best to ensure the Muslim unity we see today will continue. We are the unifying party, and we want to see this cooperation get stronger.”²⁸

Although PAS clearly expects political gains from bridging UMNO and Bersatu, this step is not merely another political strategy. PAS sees the creation of Malay and Muslim unity as a religious duty that must be undertaken by the party.²⁹ This was the reason why, as explained earlier, some of its leaders had been proposing a partnership with UMNO in the early 2010s, although the idea failed to gain traction at that time. And this is also the reason why they resurrected the Muslim unity idea again in recent years. A more elaborate justification was provided by PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang in his policy speech at the PAS Muktamar (annual general meeting) 2020 when he related that the Prophet Muhammad propagated Islam by firstly uniting his own tribe, then the Arabs, before bringing the message to non-Arabs.³⁰ By inference, Abdul Hadi was suggesting that uniting one's own community—in the case of PAS, the ethnic Malays—is part of Islam's teachings as shown by Prophet Muhammad's own actions in prioritizing his own community.

²⁷ Interview with Khairil Nizam Khirudin, 1 September 2020.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Speech by Dr Nik Muhammad Zawawi Salleh, Head of PAS Ulama (Scholars) Wing, 12 September 2020.

³⁰ Speech by Abdul Hadi Awang, 13 September 2020.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

As described earlier, the decision to work with UMNO in the *ta'awun* framework was initially not unanimously accepted by PAS' members. Some of them were very uncomfortable about working with UMNO after decades opposing it. Asking members to trust UMNO was a major challenge but PAS was able to implement it as the benefit from two core internal strengths:³¹

- i. *Disciplined party members*: PAS has perhaps one of the most well-organized and well-structured processes to produce party cadres. They learnt from the experiences of global Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Al Ikhwan Al Muslimun), and they developed a syllabus suited for the various groups they target, such as student leaders, community leaders, party activists, as well as future party leaders. This enables PAS to command compliance³² from their members relatively quickly, even when dealing with tricky issues such as working with UMNO. In the early stage of forming Muafakat Nasional, PAS leaders toured the whole country, holding dialogues and information sessions for their grassroots activists. Any concerns were immediately tackled, and “any strong objections were nipped in the bud to prevent it from spreading”.³³ This proved successful because Muafakat Nasional has been accepted at almost all levels of the party and PAS and UMNO activists are comfortably holding joint activities. However, at the time of writing this essay, PAS has not started similar activities for PN as many details are still being negotiated and no written agreement has been published yet.³⁴

³¹ Interview with Idris Ahmad, 1 July 2020.

³² The Arabic term is *wala'*.

³³ Interview with Idris Ahmad, 1 July 2020.

³⁴ Ibid.

- ii. *Clear long-term vision:* In September 2017, PAS launched its “Wawasan Induk Negara Sejahtera 2051” (WINS 2051, or Grand Vision for a Prosperous Nation 2051). This policy document outlines its broad plans on how to transform Malaysia by 2051, at which time PAS would be 100 years old. The vision is divided into three phases: transformation stage (2018–30), creating a model country (2031–40), and Malaysia as a leader (2041–51). The first phase focuses more on improving Malaysia’s governance and social welfare. This stage therefore requires PAS to work with as many partners as possible to ensure that the changes can be implemented. By having such a clear vision, members of the party “can see where we are heading to and why we decided on certain course of actions, including when we decided to partner with both UMNO and PN”.³⁵ The existence of this long-term vision therefore helped PAS to manage its members’ reaction to the changing strategies as it was able to credit the *ta’awun* to the achievement of phase 1 of the grand vision.

Having said the above, it would be wrong to assume that everything is now rosy. History has shown that in Malaysia, coalitions are not permanent.³⁶ In previous coalitions that involved PAS, the most contentious issue was always how their allies viewed PAS’ attitude towards Islamization. Both BA and PR collapsed when PAS’ coalition partners could not agree with its desire to introduce Islamic shariah law. As of now, the issue of shariah law has not yet arisen either in Muafakat Nasional or in PN. But signs are already there. In its Muktamar in September 2020, there were calls for the government to strengthen the Islamic legal system in the country. Although PAS leaders have been silent on this topic since they joined the PN administration, it remains to be seen if they are able to contain the zeal shown by some of their members and middle-level leaders.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ The longest-surviving coalition is Barisan Nasional, founded in 1973. But even then, BN membership fluctuates and at the time of writing, BN only has four members left: UMNO, MCA, MIC and PBRS.

It can also be expected that the negotiation for parliamentary and state seats to contest in GE15 will be very challenging. All PAS leaders interviewed for this study were tight-lipped on this topic, almost uniformly saying that this will be decided through cordial discussions between top leaders. But the first indication of how big the challenge will be appeared in the Youth Wing Muktamar on 12 September 2020, when delegates passed a motion requesting for PAS contests in 50 seats. Compared to the 155 seats they contested in GE14, asking for 50 in GE15 may sound reasonable, but if we consider the fact that UMNO won just 54 seats in GE14 and PAS just 18, the desire for 50 seats is no small request.

It can be expected that PAS will focus on its traditional seats in Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah.³⁷ But as shown in Table 2, the three states only have 37 parliamentary seats. Outside of these three states, PAS leaders are particularly interested in the 11 seats that were won by their splinter party Amanah in GE14, and they are keenly looking at states such as Selangor, Pahang and Perak as they see potentials for their party to grow there.³⁸ But then, the Amanah seats would only bring the seat count to 48. The remaining two seats demanded by PAS Youth Wing will have to come from seats that are currently held by other parties in other states. Even then, there is no guarantee that UMNO and Bersatu will agree to PAS monopolizing all Amanah seats. It is also unimaginable that UMNO and Bersatu will agree to giving all seats in the three states to PAS alone. All these imply that there will be some very interesting barter trading during the seat negotiations, possibly resulting in PAS exchanging secure seats in Kelantan or Terengganu with relatively safer seats in states that it wants to expand into. The exchange is not necessarily just at parliamentary level. PAS may also offer state seats in

³⁷ <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2020/09/730922/pru15-majoriti-kerusi-di-kedah-terengganu-kelantan-ditandingi-pas> (accessed 13 September 2020).

³⁸ Interview with Idris Ahmad, 1 July 2020.

Table 2: Number of Seats Contested and Won by PAS in GE14 in Its Traditional States

	Total Parliamentary Seats	Contested	Won
Kelantan	14	14	9
Terengganu	8	8	6
Kedah	15	15	3
Total	37	37	18

Kelantan and Terengganu as bargaining chips for parliamentary or state seats in constituencies that they desire to move into.

Having said the above, there have been internal voices of discontent about the way PAS has been treated by its counterparts in Muafakat Nasional and PN. Since PAS started working with UMNO in the Sungai Kandis by-election in 2018, all winnable seats had been contested by UMNO. PAS was only given the chance to contest in two by-elections, but these were in almost impossible seats: Seri Setia state seat and Port Dickson parliamentary seat. In the recent Sabah state election, PAS initially announced that it wanted to contest in up to 10 seats,³⁹ but ended up with none at all. Instead, UMNO dominated by contesting in 31 seats and Bersatu in 19 seats. Some PAS leaders have complained that being in Muafakat Nasional and PN have not brought any electoral benefit to the party, and that its role so far has been only to prop up UMNO. They have had to sacrifice their own interests while other partners have been reaping the benefits.⁴⁰

³⁹ <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-politik/pas-eyeing-six-10-seats-sabah-election-tuan-ibrahim-257044> (accessed 12 September 2020).

⁴⁰ <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-politik/prn-sabah-tiada-kerusi-kekecewaan-ahli-pas-bukan-rekaan-ahmad-fadhli-259087> (accessed 13 September 2020).

Nevertheless, as described earlier, PAS is blessed with highly disciplined members. Although some initially expressed unhappiness about how they were treated in seat distribution, they quickly toed the line when instructed by their top leaders. At the September Muktamar, Deputy President Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man called for party members to avoid unnecessary polemics about seat allocations.⁴¹ This was followed by party President Abdul Hadi Awang asking members to entrust seat negotiations to the top leaders and to abide by the decisions made by relevant committees in the party.⁴² These pronouncements very quickly quelled internal protests, and complaints seem to have dissipated since then.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

PAS today seems very clear about its role and position. In the quest to retain power in GE15, its top strategy is to ensure unity with Bersatu and UMNO. Assuming the PN can win GE15, PAS feels that it is unlikely to become the biggest party in government. But it can be the kingmaker, guaranteeing power to whomever its supports. At the time of writing, it seems that PAS is betting that it can be part of a winning coalition if it works with both UMNO and Bersatu. This, its leaders feel, is a position that will allow them to be very influential in the next administration for being the party that binds the two together.

More than just a political strategy, PAS leaders also feel that they have a religious obligation to unite the Malays and Muslims in the country. They do this by acting as a bridge that links Bersatu and UMNO, holding the parties together through their presence in both Muafakat Nasional and PN. They do not see any problems with being in both groupings since their presence ensures that the other two parties continue talk to each other. Additionally, since they have changed their strategy from

⁴¹ <https://www.bernama.com/bm/am/news.php?id=1879395> (accessed 13 September 2020).

⁴² <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/542440> (accessed 13 September 2020).

tahaluf to *ta'awun*, working with multiple partners who share the same aims is now the natural thing to do.

By pinning their latest *ta'awun* strategy to the principles of Islam, PAS has been able to convince its members about not just the need but also the permissibility of working with UMNO. At the start there were challenges, especially because PAS members have been trained for decades to regard UMNO as their major enemy. But thanks to the effectiveness of their internal political education programme, PAS members are highly disciplined and able to comply with decisions made by the party's top leaders. Protests have been minimal thus far and the partnership is gradually cascading down to the grassroots level.

PAS is also rather realistic in its expectations. Although some grassroots and middle-level leaders may be ambitious about the number of seats that should be given to PAS in the upcoming GE15, the top leaders play their moderating role very effectively. This has ensured that potential troubles are carefully managed and both its members and coalition partners feel comfortable. During the two years of Muafakat Nasional and half a year of PN, PAS has positioned itself as the rational partner, always putting Malay and Muslim unity as the higher cause and willing to make sacrifices to create and maintain unity.

At least for now, PAS seems committed to both Muafakat Nasional and PN. It revels in its current position as unifier of the *ummah* and kingmaker for the government, fulfilling both its desire to retain power and its religious obligations. Its leaders are very well aware that the biggest challenge will be to finalize seat distribution between PN members, especially between themselves and the two other Malay parties. But they also know that retaining Putrajaya will require not just effective cooperation with PN parties but also sacrifices. If they are able to make the cooperation work, then they would be major beneficiaries nevertheless. With that in mind, it is likely that PAS will work harder to make both the Muafakat Nasional and PN coalitions work.

APPENDIX: THE FULL TEXT OF MUAFAKAT NASIONAL CHARTER



PIAGAM MUAFAKAT NASIONAL

DENGAN NAMA ALLAH YANG MAHA PEMURAH LAGI MAHA PENYAYANG

DENGAN IZIN ALLAH SWT, sesungguhnya UMNO DAN PAS dengan setulus hati mengisytiharkan pembentukan suatu **Muafakat Nasional** yang membawa agenda penyatuan ummah bagi mensejahterakan Malaysia yang majmuk.

Maka dengan ini, UMNO dan PAS, menginsafi kewajipan-kewajipan untuk:

MENJUNJUNG DAN MEMPERTAHANKAN keluhuran Perlembagaan Persekutuan, yang menjamin pembentukan Negara, Islam sebagai Agama Persekutuan, Kedaulatan Raja-Raja Melayu, Kedudukan Istimewa Orang Melayu dan Bumiputera serta kepentingan sah kaum-kaum lain, Bahasa Melayu sebagai Bahasa Kebangsaan serta Menjamin Kepentingan Masyarakat Majmuk Terpelihara;

MEMPERKUKUHKAN Muafakat Nasional melalui amalan musyawarah yang melibatkan pelbagai latar agama, kaum dan budaya demi kepentingan negara.

MEMPERKASAKAN agenda Islam, Melayu dan Bumiputera secara tuntas dalam kerangka Perlembagaan Persekutuan demi membangunkan watan yang sejahtera.

MEMBENTUK KERJASAMA dengan mengembangkan naratif (Islam dan bangsa Melayu) tanpa menafikan kepelbagaian agama, kaum dan budaya sebagai paksi kepada kestabilan politik, keharmonian kaum dan kesejahteraan negara.

MENGIKHTIARKAN secara kolektif satu citra dan tawaran baru untuk negara dalam meningkatkan tadbir urus yang baik, dasar pembangunan yang inklusif dan sejahtera serta pengagihan yang menyuburkan keadilan sosial merentasi batas warna kulit dan anutan.

Justeru, marilah kita semua rakyat berganding bahu mendukung Muafakat Nasional Demi Malaysia yang Sejahtera.

DATO' SERI DR. AHMAD ZAHID
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