

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

**Singapore** | 1 March 2018

---

## **PAS' Fate in Kelantan in 2018: A Repeat of 1978?**

*Norshahril Saat\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- PAS' situation in Kelantan today mirrors electoral dynamics in the 1970s, when the Islamist party joined BN only to see itself lose control over the state in the subsequent election.
- Predictions are that PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) will not fare well in Kelantan in the coming 14th general elections.
- Since 2013, several developments in Kelantan have weakened PAS' grip on the state: the death of former Chief Minister Nik Aziz Nik Mat; increased factionalism in PAS; and a more “conservative” UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) that can entice some PAS supporters to switch sides.
- The PAS-Amanah (National Trust Party) split in 2015 will likely increase the atmosphere of political contest in the state. With three-cornered fights expected, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) is expected to regain control of the Malay-majority state this year.

*\* The author is Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, and is Co-coordinator of the Indonesian Studies Programme at the Institute. He wishes to thank Ms Pearlyn Y. Pang for her assistance in drawing up electoral maps and graphs.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is only a matter of weeks before the 14<sup>th</sup> general election (GE 14) is called in Malaysia. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has been governed by one coalition of parties. Today, this coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN) is being challenged by an opposition coalition called Pakatan Harapan (PH, Alliance of Hope). While analysts have been wondering whether BN can retain the states it governs, such as Johor, Kedah, Negeri Sembilan and Perak, and whether it can regain the state of Selangor, given the ongoing bickering there over PH seat allocations at the grassroots level,<sup>1</sup> little attention has been given to Kelantan, which may swing back to BN after 28 years of the rule of PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia). Although an opposition party at the federal level, PAS is not a PH member. If PH is eyeing a Malay “tsunami” to win the next election, then Kelantan will be its test bed: 95 percent of its voters are Malays, and it is a largely rural state.

This paper discusses whether 2018 will see the end of PAS’ 28-year rule there. The state offers 14 parliament seats and 45 state seats. At the national level, the party recently suffered a bad split, resulting in a significantly weakened leadership. This is likely to affect its level of support in Kelantan, the party’s power base. PAS is also likely to face multiple opponents, and a stronger BN compared to the elections in 2008 and 2013. PAS’ situation today bears many similarities with its performance in the 1970s, when after it joined BN in the early 1970s, it lost Kelantan in 1978.

### PAS RULE IN KELANTAN (1957-2013)

The first period of PAS rule in Kelantan lasted from 1959 to 1974. In 1974, PAS joined BN and thereafter played second fiddle to UMNO. Although BN won all the 36 Kelantan state seats in the 1974 elections, PAS could not have the final say on how the state should be run. Instead that became the prerogative of the federal government, and of UMNO in particular. PAS’ membership in BN was short-lived due to internal divisions, and it further suffered the consequences of BN’s divide-and-rule strategy. Tensions had been long-running within the party between two PAS leaders, Mohammad Asri Muda and Mohamad Nasir. In 1964, Asri became the Kelantan Chief Minister. He was a good orator, but his track record leading Kelantan was poor. For example, his government incurred massive debts and had to borrow RM 5 million from commercial banks to finance state spending. It also had to borrow extensively from the federal government.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, he was able to lead PAS to successive victories in Kelantan, including in 1969. In 1970, PAS appointed Asri as its President, and it was under him that PAS entered the BN coalition. After the 1974 election, Asri became a Minister for Land and Rural Development in the federal government.

Asri’s rival, Mohamad Nasir, replaced him as Chief Minister of Kelantan, and he undertook massive reforms, including revisiting some of the deals the Asri government had carried out. He also froze some projects that Asri had concluded. These moves proved popular. In September 1977, about 80 000 people Kelantanese protested in Kota Bharu. Asri was publicly condemned as a “traitor” of Islam for bringing PAS into BN.

In October 1977, Asri engineered a vote of no confidence against the Mohamad Nasir government. He did not get enough support from his BN partners even though 20 PAS assemblymen voted with him. To add salt to Asri’s wounds, the Prime Minister, Hussein

Onn, intervened and took charge of Kelantan by declaring a state of emergency in the state. Upset that the federal government had not supported him, Asri took PAS out of BN.

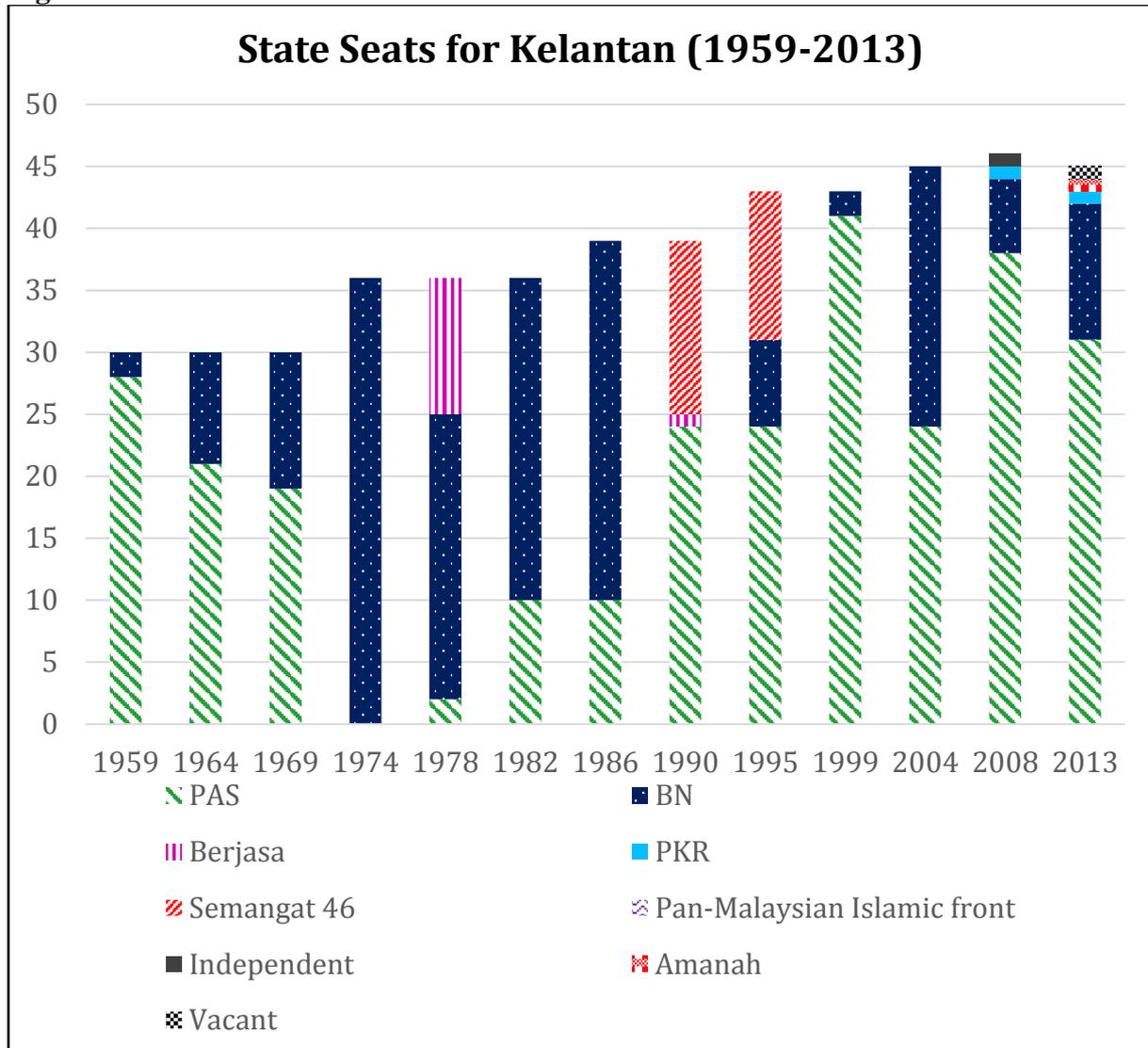
In 1978, PAS contested the elections independently and won five parliament seats, two of which were in Kelantan. Mohamad Nasir, in turn, had formed Berjasa and joined forces with UMNO in BN. Berjasa won seven parliament seats in Kelantan.<sup>3</sup> PAS would regain control of Kelantan in 1990, but by then it was led by a new type of leaders—religious clerics (ulama).

In the 1980s, UMNO underwent an internal crisis. Conflict between Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah led to a split in the party and resulted in the formation of Semangat 46 (Spirit of 1946). Teaming up successfully with Semangat 46 in 1990, PAS won seven parliament seats and Semangat 46 won six. At the state level, PAS won 24 seats and Semangat 46 14 seats. BN failed to secure even a single seat. A conservative ulama, Nik Aziz Nik Mat, was appointed Chief Minister.

Nik Aziz served as Chief Minister for 23 years and stepped down only after the 2013 elections. During his rule, Nik Aziz made Islamisation his top priority.<sup>4</sup> He banned cultural performances deemed not in line with Islamic values and introduced rulings such as gender segregation in public places, including separate counters for males and females.

Figure 1 is a summary of the electoral performance of different political parties in the state of Kelantan from 1959 to 2013.

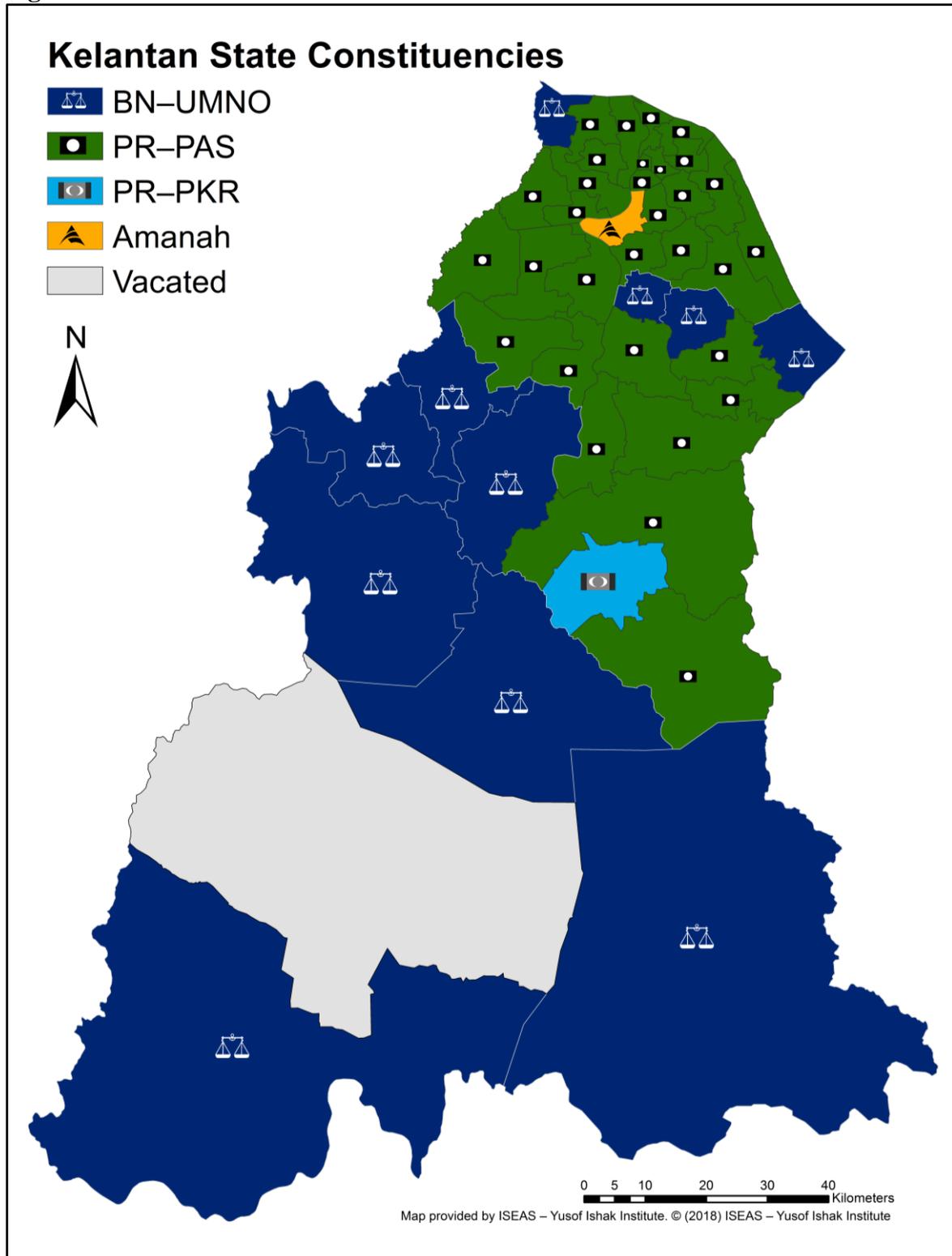
**Figure 1**



**NATIONAL AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 2013**

What of the situation today? In the latest elections held in 2013, PAS won the state government comfortably. It gained the urban seat of Kota Bharu and the semi-urban seats of Pengkalan Chepa and Bachok, while the rural seats went either to BN or to PAS. All in all, PAS garnered 32 seats, BN won 12 seats, and the PKR (People’s Justice Party) retained only one of four seats that it had held. The remaining three were lost to UMNO. PAS dropped as many as six seats. In fact, one PAS state assembly member switched camps to join Amanah after the latter party was formed. PAS’ position in Kelantan seems to have been declining. The party’s close relations with DAP (Democratic Action Party) and PKR did not win it more votes. And in 2015, PAS left Pakatan Rakyat (People’s Coalition). Figure 2 demonstrates the seat allocation based on parties for the Kelantan state legislative assembly today, after considering the PAS-Amanah split and PAS’ departure from Pakatan Rakyat.

Figure 2



The 2018 election will be PAS’ first contest since 1990 without its supreme leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat. The veteran politician passed away in 2015 and left a political vacuum in the party. Nik Aziz was the party’s Spiritual Guide (*murshidul am*) and not only commanded reverence from party cadres, but from the masses as well. No one could match the leader’s

charisma. Nik Aziz's humble lifestyle, even as Chief Minister of the state, was potently felt by ordinary Kelantanese. He made himself easily accessible, and people were free to speak to him after congregational prayers.

Nik Aziz was strongly against PAS-UMNO reconciliation, and accused UMNO for not supporting Islamic laws in the form of *hudud* (modes of punishment that include stoning, caning, and chopping of hands).<sup>5</sup> Thus, any form of cooperation between the two parties now will be seen as a diversion from the thinking of PAS' late spiritual leader.

Upon Nik Aziz's death, the seat of the *murshidul am* was taken over by Dato Haron Din. Although his base was not in Kelantan, he nevertheless commanded respect among PAS grassroots. Unfortunately for the party, Haron passed away in 2016, just one year after taking over the role.

The situation for PAS worsened with the party between the so-called progressive-professionals and the conservative ulama. Analysts and observers use these terms to distinguish the two camps though, in truth, the ideas promoted by the so-called progressives are not always much different from those taught by the conservatives. The 2014 PAS Mukhtar (General Assembly), held in Johor, saw the marginalisation of progressives by the clerics and ulama.<sup>6</sup> At the party's annual general assembly in 2015, the progressives were ultimately and heatedly removed from the leadership of the party. PAS Deputy President Mat Sabu, a leader in the progressive camp, was defeated in the party election, and some other heavyweights joined him in exiting the party to join Amanah.

The PAS-Amanah split will definitely affect the political contest in Kelantan. It is likely that Amanah will contest the seats that are now held by PAS. Already, there are rumours that Amanah is eyeing five parliament seats: Pengkalan Chepa, Kuala Krai, Rantau Panjang, Kubang Keruan, and Kota Bharu. This will result in three-cornered fights between PH (which Amanah is part of), BN (probably UMNO), and PAS.<sup>7</sup> At the state level, the constituency to watch is Salor. This will likely be contested by Amanah's candidate for Chief Minister, Husam Musa. In the 2013 election, Husam as PAS member obtained 60.3 percent of the votes against BN's Mohd Nordin Awang, who got 38.6 percent. The seat may witness a three cornered fight, if BN decides to contest it as well. Husam has faced several challenges lately. One issue that has cropped up is his use of Wisma Tok Guru as his office. PAS members claim that they too have a right to those premises. In any case, this issue is unlikely to affect Husam's chances.

Some developments external to the party may shape PAS' electoral strategies and campaign. Since 2015, UMNO and Prime Minister Najib Razak in particular have been using carrots rather than sticks in trying to forge closer relations with PAS, its long-time rival. During the UMNO general assembly in 2016 and 2017, Najib in fact praised the party for its commitment to uniting the Malays and Muslims in the country. Najib has endorsed the call to raise the maximum sentence of the shariah courts from the existing three years' jail, fine of RM 5000, and six strokes of the cane, to 30 years in jail, RM 100 000 in fine, and 100 lashes of the cane.<sup>8</sup> His government allowed PAS president, Abdul Hadi Awang, to table a private member's bill seeking amendments to ACT 355.<sup>9</sup> So far, there has not been much discussion about the bill though it may be a campaigning issue that will make UMNO more accepted in the urban areas of the state. It is also too early to say how UMNO-PAS reconciliation will play out among Kelantan voters. To be sure, followers of Nik Aziz will

not easily forgive UMNO, but then, they may also be uneasy with the opposition's choice of Mahathir Mohamad as its Prime Ministerial candidate. Most of Nik Aziz's criticisms were after all directed at Mahathir when he was Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003, and it was the Mahathir government that prevented PAS from implementing hudud at the state level in 1993.

### **CONCLUSION: A REPEAT OF 1974-1978?**

Some observers expect the 2018 elections to see the end of PAS control over Kelantan, and the return of BN rule. According to Khalid Samad, a former PAS leader and a founder of Amanah, "PAS today is not the same PAS shaped by Ustaz Fadzil Noor and Tok Guru Nik Aziz. Conversely, the vision demonstrated by the PAS leadership today is myopic and out of touch. Only those who had been part of PAS leadership over the years will understand how PAS has changed."<sup>10</sup>

However, despite its internal problems, PAS has shaped the minds of Kelantanese for 27 years, and it has successfully made Islam central to its struggle. While issues related to development, corruption, and costs of living are important to Kelantanese, which party can best represent Muslim interests is equally important. On Islamic matters, PAS' popularity is unrivalled.

One factor that may turn voters away from PAS is how they perceive its cooperation with BN (or with UMNO, to be precise). PAS will have to draw lessons from its days within BN in the 1970s to prevent a repeat of another poor showing in 2018. In many ways, PAS is currently in a situation similar to that which it was in in the 1970s. First, PAS is currently friendly to UMNO, though not through a formal coalition like in the 1970s. PAS made it clear that it prefers to go it alone, yet it is less critical of UMNO than of PH. On that, PAS seems sensitive to sentiments on the ground, which are against a formal merger with UMNO. Its sense of being betrayed by UMNO in the 1970s still haunts many PAS members. But by going it alone, PAS risks overstressing itself across the 130 constituencies it plans to contest.<sup>11</sup>

Second, factionalism in PAS in the last two years mirror that of the 1970s. In the 1970s, PAS conservatives broke ranks with the Malay nationalists: the former represented by the ulama and the latter by the Asri Muda camp. Today, the split is between the conservatives and the professionals, with the former led by the ulama, and the latter by the non-ulama. Third, PAS was under the control of one strong leader—Asri Muda in the 1970s, and Abdul Hadi Awang today. There are presently no challenges to Abdul Hadi's authority. For Kelantan, current Chief Minister Ahmad Yakob does not have the same standing as Nik Aziz.

These comparisons suggest the challenges that lie ahead for PAS in 2018, but may not necessarily mean that it will lose Kelantan. Be that as it may, PAS' track record in managing Kelantan's economy is far from convincing. In fact, Kelantan remains one of the poorest states in Malaysia. One can expect BN to initiate many development and infrastructure projects to boost its chances in regaining Kelantan. Already, Prime Minister Najib Razak has launched the Sungai Kelantan's Integrated River Basin Development in Lembah Sireh, which costs RM 572 million.<sup>12</sup> Also in the pipeline is the expansion of the Sultan Ismail

Petra Airport in Pengkalan Chepa and the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) that will connect Kelantan with its neighbours Terengganu and Pahang.<sup>13</sup> All these will add to the challenges PAS faces in Kelantan.

<sup>1</sup> *Straits Times*, “Selangor Pakatan leaders to discuss seat allocations after bitter public bickering,” 6 February 2018

<sup>2</sup> Farish A Noor, *The Malaysian Islamic Party PAS 1951-2013: Islamism in a Mottled Nation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), p.73.

<sup>3</sup> To understand more about the PAS performance in 1970s, see Farish A Noor, *The Malaysian Islamic Party PAS 1951-2013: Islamism in a Mottled Nation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014)

<sup>4</sup> Norshahril Saat. ‘Islamising Malayness: Ulama Discourse and Authority in Contemporary Malaysia’ In *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life*. 2012, Volume 6 (2), 135-153

<sup>5</sup> See Annual Bakri Haron, *Live from Unplugged 2: Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat* (Kuala Lumpur: Anbakri Publika Sdn Bhd, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Khalid Samad, *Dari PAS ke Amanah: Berani Berprinsip II*, (Selangor: Ilham Books, 2016), pp. 63-89

<sup>7</sup> PBBM will likely focus on UMNO held seats of Jeli and Gua Musang.

<sup>8</sup> Melissa Darlyne Chow, “Hadi tables bill to amend RUU 355 in Parliament,” *New Straits Times*, 6 April 2017, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2017/04/227758/hadi-tables-bill-amend-ruu-355-parliament>

<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, PAS leaders are comfortable sharing the same stage with UMNO leaders. They were seen organising rallies together particularly in voicing their protests on the Rohingya issue. Their solidarity on global issues may be an attempt to win over the conservative Muslim crowd who felt that UMNO has shown greater interests in Islamic matters.

<sup>10</sup> Khalid Samad, *Dari PAS ke Amanah: Berani Berprinsip II*, (Selangor: Ilham Books, 2016)

<sup>11</sup> Sheridan Mahavera, “PAS to contest more than 130 parliamentary seats in GE14,” *The Malaysian Insight*, 21 January 2018

<sup>12</sup> The Malaymail Online. “PM Najib arrives for one-day working visit to Kelantan,” 28 January 2018. <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/pm-najib-arrives-for-one-day-working-visit-to-kelantan>

<sup>13</sup> The Sun Daily, “Development projects in Kelantan, proof BN govt is fair: Najib,” 28 January 2018. <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2018/01/28/development-projects-kelantan-proof-bn-govt-fair-najib>

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by:</p> <p><b>ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute</b></p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests exclusively with the author(s). No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author(s) of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn and Benjamin Loh</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	---