

PERSPECTIVE

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How Far Will PAS Deviate from the Ulama Leadership Model, and Why Does it Matter?

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Hadi Awang at the 69th PAS Mukhtar 2023 at the IDCC Convention Centre held from 20 to 22 October 2023. Source: Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) Pusat, Facebook.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Ulama (religious scholars) have always been at the core of Malaysia's Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), and their leadership has been seen as a necessity for the party to keep to its political agenda.
- PAS may accommodate leaders and members with different backgrounds, but the top leadership positions are dominated by those versed in Islamic studies.
- The 2015 party congress (muktamar) saw a purge of the moderate professional faction, which left the conservatives fully in charge, in particular the Ulama leadership.
- However, since its surprise overachievement in the 2018 general election, PAS has been gradually promoting non-Ulamas to take up vital leadership positions, beginning with the appointment of Ahmad Samsuri Mokhtar as the Chief Minister of Terengganu in 2018 and Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor as the Chief Minister of Kedah in 2020.
- The leadership shift raises two questions: How far is PAS willing to deviate from Ulama leadership, and what type of non-Ulama leadership the party is promoting?
- Given its ambition to expand its reach beyond the rural northern Malay heartlands, PAS seems likely to induct more professionals/technocrats into its leadership ranks, to enhance its credibility for administrative and economic governance. Nevertheless, PAS will probably ensure that these new leaders will uphold the party's commitment to core Islamic principles.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the Ulama (religious scholars) leadership took control of the party in the 1980s, the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS) has always chosen an Ulama to be Chief Minister in states it has won. When PAS regained Kelantan in 1990, its candidate for the Chief Minister post was the late Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, an Ulama trained in Egypt and Pakistan. Nine years later, when PAS wrested the Terengganu state government from Barisan Nasional (BN), its choice for Chief Minister was Hadi Awang, a Middle East-trained Ulama and the current president of PAS. Two Chief Ministers that succeeded Nik Aziz – Ahmad Yakob and Muhammad Nussuruddin Daud – also had Islamic studies background. In 2008, riding high on the reformist wave of the then-Pakatan Rakyat coalition, PAS managed to capture the state government of Kedah and subsequently appointed the late Azizan Abdul Razak, an Ulama with educational training in the Middle East and the UK, as Chief Minister. While PAS's leadership may reflect a broad cross-section of society, the Ulama still remain at the heart of the party.

The practice of appointing Ulama as Chief Minister changed in 2018 when PAS won the Terengganu state government. The party's choice for the post was Ahmad Samsuri Mokhtar, an aerospace engineer and a university lecturer with a PhD from the University of Leeds. The appointment was unprecedented since Hadi Awang, the former Chief Minister, still loomed large in the picture. But then it was not much of a surprise as Samsuri was then political secretary to Hadi Awang, which meant his elevation to the Chief Minister post had the full blessing of his former boss. What made the appointment of Samsuri intriguing is that it took place in the wake of the purging of the professional (Erdogan) faction in the party in 2015, which later splintered off and formed a new Islamic party, Amanah. In the aftermath, the Ulama leadership consolidated its hold over the party, leading one to think that there was no room for pragmatists and professionals in PAS. The selection of Samsuri as the Chief Minister of Terengganu proved that to not necessarily be the case.

The ascendancy of Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor in Kedah, and in national politics for that matter, continues to signal a shift from the Ulama leadership. Sanusi took over the Chief Minister post in May 2020 after the state fell to Perikatan Nasional when several PH state assemblypersons switched their allegiance and triggered the change of government. Sanusi happened to be the opposition leader in the state assembly at the time, which made him the new Chief Minister by default. Known for his populist everyday man appeal and shoot-from-the-hip public statements, Sanusi was neither an Ulama nor a professional.¹ A Social Science graduate from the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, his CV seems to straddle both private business and public service. Not even a year into his tenure, there was already talk of replacing him with Takiyuddin Hassan, PAS's secretary general, due to uneasiness over his abrasive, confrontational style.² Sanusi soon proved to be politically cunning and not easy to dislodge from the post of Chief Minister. And so, his appointment as the Chief Minister following PN's stellar performance in the recent state elections was a foregone conclusion, a testament to his popularity, not just in Kedah but also in the rest of Malaysia.

At the moment, there are two types of non-Ulama leaders on display: the professional Samsuri-led state government in Terengganu and the populist Sanusi-led state government in Kedah. PAS seems to have realised that for it to stay relevant, it needs to revamp its image, particularly to appeal to newly enfranchised young Malays and affluent urban Malays. It has to move away

from the pejorative label “parti lebai” and try a new strategy to market itself.³ Hence in recent state elections, PAS promised that states under its control would be governed by both professionals and Ulama, particularly Kelantan, where the economic development has been lagging behind Terengganu and Kedah.⁴

CHOOSING LEADERS WITHIN PAS

As an ideologically-driven party, all candidates for political positions at the state and federal levels have to be vetted and approved by the party’s main authority, Majlis Syura Ulama (Council of Ulama Leadership). Majlis Syura Ulama was established in the early 1980s for the Ulama leadership to cement its takeover of the party from the Malay nationalists. It consists of no more than 17 Ulama drawn from various components of the party: four from the Central Working Committee, four from the Dewan Ulama PAS Pusat (Central PAS Ulama Assembly), two from the youth wing, two from the women’s wing, and five from the Majlis Syura Ulama itself. The head of the Majlis Syura Ulama is called “mursyidul am” (spiritual leader) and is the highest authority in the party, alongside the party president who oversees day-to-day governing affairs.

The selection process begins when the party at the state level submits to the Majlis Syura Ulama its slate of candidates for elections and leadership posts such as the Chief Minister and state Exco members.⁵ This is to ensure that candidates not only pass the requisite financial and background checks but are also closely vetted for their unwavering ideological commitment. Since the 2015 mass purge of the “Erdogan faction,” PAS has hardened ideologically, with the remaining conservative faction pulling the party further to the right. There was no more room in PAS for ideological differences. By the 2018 general elections, they had completely consolidated their control over the party, and this paid off handsomely. Contesting as a third force, PAS performed beyond expectations by winning 18 seats, creating its own “green wave” in Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu.⁶ One key takeaway from PAS’s achievement in the 2018 general election is that the party knows it can be both religiously dogmatic and electorally viable. There is no need for it to compromise its ideology to be politically relevant, the way it did when it was part of Barisan Alternatif and Pakatan Rakyat. PAS’s electoral performance has only gone from strength to strength since 2018. As part of the PN coalition, PAS won 49 seats in the 2022 general elections, making it the party with most seats among all parties in the parliament. An estimated 54 percent of Malays voted for PN, proving the saliency of its hardline political stance to champion the special position of Malays and Islam.⁷

THE LEADERSHIP IN PN-GOVERNED STATES

At the same time, PAS also realises that it needs rejuvenation. The danger of being in power for a long time, as is the case of the PAS state government in Kelantan where the party has governed continuously for 33 years, is that it breeds complacency and voter fatigue. This is particularly so in Kelantan which has not been able to generate much economic development and employment. There is actual worry that by being Ulama-centric alone would not to sustain the party into the future. Instead, PAS needs to put forward fresh candidates with non-religious backgrounds, namely professionals, an exercise one PAS activist terms *fiqh taghyir* (interpreting the shariah precepts in the context of change).⁸ In Kelantan, 23 out of 45 PN candidates who contested in the state election were new, of which eight came from a

professional background, unprecedented in the land known as Serambi Mekah (Verandah of Mecca).⁹

PN was downright dominant in its strongholds in the recent state elections. It won 33 out of 36 seats in Kedah, 43 out of 45 seats in Kelantan, and 32 out of 32 seats in Terengganu. The sweeping results meant that these are effectively one-party states and PN can appoint any state leadership lineup it chooses without having to compromise with others. It is also an opportunity for PN to walk its election campaign talk of wanting to inject more professionalism in the states that it governs. The current composition of state exco in these three states is a good indicator of whether PN is ready to veer away from Ulama leadership and embrace more professionals into its leadership ranks.

Figure 1: Composition of state exco in PN-governed states¹⁰

	Ulama	Professionals	Technocrat	Business	Others	Total
Kedah	1	1	4	3	1	10
Kelantan	4	2	3	-	1	10
Terengganu	5	3	-	3	-	11
Perlis	1	2	-	2	2	7

From Figure 1 above, we can observe that Ulama plays an outsize role in the stewardship of Kelantan and Terengganu, where they make up nearly half of the present state exco lineup. Despite its campaign rhetoric, PAS is still not ready to part with Ulama leadership in these two states. The populations of Kelantan and Terengganu are homogenously Malays (more than 95 percent), predominantly rural, and hold deeply conservative Islamic values. These factors might explain why the Ulama wield substantive socio-political cachet and feature prominently in the state leadership, notwithstanding the presence of professionals within its ranks including the Chief Minister post. However, in Kedah, both Ulama and professionals are not a big part of the state exco lineup, which is dominated by technocrats and businesspersons. Unlike Kelantan and Terengganu, Kedah's population is slightly more diverse, with Malays comprising 76 percent of the overall state population. Kedah also has the comparative edge of being close to Penang, a wealthy state with a strong industrial base that provides employment for many Kedah residents and spillover economic development, namely the Kulim Hitech Park abutting the Penang-Kedah border. As such, business acumen and policy-making experience seem to be the state exco's prerequisites in Kedah and might explain why the composition of state exco in Kedah varies from the ones in Kelantan and Terengganu.

Perlis is uncharted territory for PAS as it had long been the unbreachable bastion of UMNO in the north. PAS never had political success in Perlis until the 2022 general elections. The defection of UMNO Perlis's warlord Shahidan Kassim to PN and the overwhelming vote transfer from UMNO to PN finally allowed PAS to capture Perlis for the first time. While its seven-member state Exco is dominated by PAS (five members) with Bersatu making up the rest, Exco members with professional and business backgrounds comprise the majority of the state leadership. This is possibly due to the need to sustain the support of UMNO members who voted for PN; UMNO's legacy still looms large in the state.

CHARTING A NEW LEADERSHIP PATH?

It is clear that while PAS acknowledges the urgency to reshape the party's image when it comes to aptitude and relevance in confronting modern challenges, the efforts should not be undertaken at the expense of sidelining the Ulama leadership's authority and diluting the party's core ideology. The current state government in Terengganu showcases the governing equilibrium between maintaining Ulama's imprimatur and incorporating professionalism. Kelantan, meanwhile, despite the pre-state election promise to recruit more professionals, has failed to seize the opportunity, and the Ulama continue to play a prominent role in the state leadership. It is in Kedah that we can see a discernible divergence from the traditional Ulama leadership.

The Sanusi-led state government in Kedah raises two questions about the shift in leadership practice within PAS: First, will we be seeing more non-Ulama leaders promoted within PAS and entrusted with important positions such as helming the state government, and second, What type of government can we expect from these non-Ulama leaders?¹¹

As with any conservative political party, change happens at a glacial pace with PAS. It knows that it must adapt to the demands of present-day politics, namely the ambition to expand beyond its northern and northeastern bastions, and its need to do so without significantly diluting its ideology. In the 2022 general elections and the 2023 state elections, PAS, by way of PN, managed to carve inroads into urban and semi-urban areas in Selangor and Penang. Urban and semi-urban supporters of PAS expect their elected representatives to not only have a solid religious foundation but also a firm grasp on policy-making processes and bread-and-butter issues faced by the public. It is no longer enough for a PAS leader to simply say Islam is the solution but not ground it in concrete, empirically-informed policies. It is the reason why we will see more professionals and technocrats rise through party ranks. The pre-state election *Debat Ekonomi* (Debate on Economy) between Rafizi Ramli, the current Minister of Economy and Mohd Syahir Che Sulaiman, the PAS MP for Bachok in Kelantan, is an example of PAS's effort to project a professional image to society at-large.¹² The debate was broadcasted live nationwide and provided a rare platform for PAS to show the general public that the party is capable of offering more than just religious homilies to modern-day economic challenges.¹³

It then begs the question what type of government we can expect when it is led by non-Ulama leaders? The current state governments in Kedah and Terengganu offer more than mere glimpses of what the non-Ulama leadership brings to the table. On one hand, it is economically pragmatic since both states have a much stronger and vibrant economic base than Kelantan. Professionals and technocrats, due to their background and experience, are better suited to deal with investors and businesses in their respective states. PAS's Islamist ideology does not subscribe to any particular economic orthodoxy, which allows these non-Ulama leaders to pursue their own economic prerogatives without running afoul of the party.¹⁴ On the other hand, the non-Ulama leaders are no different than the Ulama leaders when it comes to enacting PAS's hardline stance on morality issues. Kedah under Sanusi's administration has moved to ban all gaming and lottery outlets in the state while the professional-led government of Terengganu has introduced amendments to the state's shariah laws that criminalise out-of-wedlock pregnancy, women who dress like men (*pengkid*), preparation to commit sodomy, black magic and sorcery, among others.¹⁵ Terengganu state government has also recently

barred Muslim girls from gymnastics because of the sport's tight-fitting clothes.¹⁶ Simply put, economic pragmatism does not equate religious moderation.

Hadi Awang, the current president of PAS, who is in the twilight of his leadership in the party, can rest assured that PAS will remain faithful to its hardline ideological course long after he is gone. Besides the two aforementioned leaders who used to be his protégés – Ahmad Samsuri Mokhtar and Mohd Syahir Che Sulaiman – Hadi Awang's son, Muhammad Khalil Abdul Hadi, and his son-in-law, Zaharuddin Muhammad, 46 and 47 years old respectively, are also prominent party leaders. Muhammad Khalil is the state assemblyperson for Batu Buruk in Terengganu and the state Exco member for communication, Islamic propagation (dakwah), and strengthening of syariah. He recently completed his PhD at the Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) in Terengganu with the thesis title "Hak berpolitik orang bukan Islam di Malaysia menurut Siyasah Syar'iyah" (Non-Muslims political rights in Malaysia according to syariah politics).¹⁷ Zaharuddin Muhammad is a Middle East-trained ustaz (religious teacher) who used to be a member of Majlis Syura Ulama PAS and the Deputy Director of PAS's Research Centre. Since the passing of the former *mursyidul am*, Nik Aziz Nik Mat, in 2015, Hadi Awang has molded the party to his dogmatic ethnoreligious worldview and with his people now forming the next line of leadership, there is no reason to see PAS moderating its ideological stance any time soon.¹⁸

Common ideological commitment remains the holding centre, as the Ulama share the mantle of party leadership with professionals and technocrats. PAS leaders and members, regardless of backgrounds, are well drilled in the party's core ideology, which is the struggle to Islamise the state and society in Malaysia.¹⁹ Many have joined PAS during their formative years, wended through its educational network, campus organisations, study circles (usrah) and various party indoctrination activities, and have fully internalised PAS's values. When it comes to ideological commitment, there is no qualitative difference between Ulama and non-Ulama leaders. No one in the party doubt the devotion of non-Ulama leaders such as Samsuri and Sanusi to the cause, who can don their Western garb – in the case of Sanusi, even go shirtless in public – not having to pepper their speech with references from the Quran and hadith, and still be taken seriously as leaders of an Islamic party. It is this type of leaders, a composite of non-Ulama background and party dogma, that we will be seeing more from PAS in the near future.

APPENDIX: List of PAS's Chief Ministers and Their Background

State	PAS Chief Ministers / Background				
Kelantan	Ishak Lotfi Omar (1959-1964)	Mohd Asri Muda (1964-1973)	Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat (1990-2013)	Ahmad Yakob (2013-2023)	Mohd Nassuruddin Daud (2023-)
	Ulama	Ulama	Ulama	Ulama	Ulama
Terengganu	Mohd Daud Abdul Samad (1959-1961)	Abdul Hadi Awang (1999-2004)	Ahmad Samsuri Mokhtar (2018-)		
	Technocrat	Ulama	Professional		
Kedah	Azizan Abdul Razak (2008-2013)	Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor (2020-)			
	Ulama	Business/Technocrat			
Perlis	Mohd Shukri Ramli (2023-)				
	Retired teacher				

ENDNOTES

¹ James Chai, "Sanusi's Bully Pulpit Populism: Boon or Bane?" *Fulcrum*, 4 August 2023: <https://fulcrum.sg/sanusi-bully-pulpit-populism-booster-or-belly-up/> (accessed on 8 September 2023).

² Yasmin Ramlan, "Takiyuddin nafi akan ganti MB Kedah, PAS puas hati prestasi Sanusi," *Malaysiakini*, 29 January 2021: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/560896> (accessed on 8 September 2023).

³ Lebai is a general term used to describe devout but often unsophisticated Muslims.

⁴ Shahrul Shahabudin, "Gabungan Ulama-profesional di Kelantan petunjuk PAS tumpu pembangunan'," *Free Malaysia Today*, 27 August 2023: <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/bahasa/tempatan/2023/08/27/gabungan-Ulama-profesional-di-kelantan-petunjuk-pas-tumpu-pembangunan/> (accessed on 8 September 2023); Norhaspida Yatim, "PRN: PAS tampil calon Ulama, profesional di Terengganu," *Sinar Harian*, 28 July 2023: <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/270555/berita/politik/prn-pas-tampil-calon-Ulama-profesional-di-terengganu> (accessed on 8 September 2023).

⁵ "Majlis Syura teliti lebih 40 peratus calon baru," *Harakah Daily*, 13 July 2023: <https://harakahdaily.net/index.php/2023/07/13/majlis-syura-teliti-lebih-40-peratus-calon-baharu/> (accessed on 10 September 2023).

⁶ Azmil Tayeb, "Green Wave of Change in the East Coast: PAS and Anti-UMNO Backlash in Kelantan." *JEBAT: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics and Strategic Studies* 45:1 (2018), 232-250.

⁷ Charlene Chua et al, "How a divided Malaysia gave rise to Perikatan Nasional's 'teal tsunami'," *The Straits Times*, 17 December 2022: <https://www.straitstimes.com/multimedia/graphics/2022/12/malaysia-ge2022-analysis-age-ethnicity/index.html?shell> (accessed on 10 September 2023).

⁸ Ahmad Fahmi Mokhtar, "Calon PRN: Langkah berani PAS Kelantan," *Harakah Daily*, 4 August 2023: <https://harakahdaily.net/index.php/2023/08/04/calon-prn-langkah-berani-pas-kelantan/> (accessed on 10 September 2023).

⁹ Nor Fazlian Abdul Rahim and Hidayatiayu Razali, “51.1 peratus calon PN Kelantan muka baru,” *Harian Metro*, 28 June 2023: <https://www.hmetro.com.my/mutakhir/2023/07/992538/511-peratus-calon-pn-kelantan-muka-baharu> (accessed on 10 September 2023).

¹⁰ In many cases the backgrounds of Exco members are not clear cut. Many have had experience working for or running state-owned companies before getting elected to office. I put them under the business category. Technocrats are those who have previously worked for the state or federal government. Professionals, meanwhile, are those with backgrounds in technical fields such as engineering, medical, dentistry, accountancy and others. Ulama are those with Islamic education training, who used to be teachers, lecturers and/or owners of informal madrasah (Islamic schools) and tahfiz (Quranic memorization) schools.

¹¹ Sanusi recently rejected the rank-and-files’ efforts to nominate him for the party’s three vice president positions. He said that qualities needed to lead a party are different than qualities to lead a state. According to him, that is why the PAS state commissioner of Kedah and the Chief Minister of Kedah are two different people, the former being an Ulama while the latter (Sanusi) is a non-Ulama. “Muktamar PAS: Sanusi tolak pencalonan jawatan Naib Presiden PAS,” *Astro Awani*, 27 September 2023: <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/muktamar-pas-sanusi-tolak-pencalonan-jawatan-naib-presiden-pas-439292>? (accessed on 27 September 2023).

¹² Mohd Syahir Che Sulaiman is a former corporate accountant, who later worked as political secretary for Hadi Awang, the current president of PAS, before getting elected as the MP for Bachok in the 2022 general elections. He is also active on X (formerly known as Twitter) using the handle @syahirnomic with more than 50,000 followers, fashioning himself as the party’s policy wonk on economic matters.

¹³ Firdaus Azil, “Debat Ekonomi: Cerakin, hadamkan isi hujah Rafizi dan Syahir,” *Astro Awani*, 10 August 2023: <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/debat-rafizisyahir-malam-ini-rakyat-jadi-pengadil-431877> (accessed on 10 September 2023).

¹⁴ Even so, PAS believes in the notion of “parti menguasai kerajaan” (party controls the government) that conflates the interests of the party with the interests of the state government. It means that economic policies pursued by non-Ulama leaders would also have to benefit the party. See Azmil Tayeb, “Explaining PAS’s Dominance in Kelantan,” *Trends in Southeast Asia*, Issue 17 (2022), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, p. 17.

¹⁵ Ahmad Mukhsein Mukhtar, “The end of 4D gaming outlets in Kedah today as ban comes into force,” *New Straits Times*, 1 January 2023:

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/01/866160/end-4d-gaming-outlets-kedah-today-ban-comes-force> ; “Sihir, bomoh, ‘pengkid’ jadi jenayah syariah baharu di Terengganu,” *Free Malaysia Today*, 1 December 2022:

<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/bahasa/tempatan/2022/12/01/sihir-bomoh-pengkid-jadi-jenayah-syariah-baharu-di-terengganu/> (accessed on 10 September 2023).

¹⁶ “Terengganu tak benarkan wanita sertai gimnastik,” *Malaysiakini*, 4 October 2023:

<https://www.malaysiakini.com/sukan/681499> (accessed on 10 October 2023).

¹⁷ He also holds a Masters degree from Portsmouth University in the UK. His PhD thesis at UniSZA can be referred to here:

<https://cendekia.unisza.edu.my/neuseal/Author/Home?author=Muhammad+Khalil+Abdul+Hadi> (accessed on 12 October 2023).

¹⁸ James Chai, “Abdul Hadi Awang Enhances His Power as PAS President and Drives the Party to the Far-Right,” *ISEAS Perspective* 2023/85: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-85-abdul-hadi-awang-enhances-his-power-as-pas-president-and-drives-the-party-to-the-far-right-by-james-chai/> (accessed on 24 October 2023).

¹⁹ Perlembagaan PAS: <https://pas.org.my/perlembagaan-pas/> (accessed on 10 September 2023).

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