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The Pakatan Rakyat Collapse: Implications for Party Politics in Malaysia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The collapse of Pakatan Rakyat (PR) carries great significance for the future of opposition coalition politics in Malaysia. Several attempts are to be expected at regrouping and realignment of existing political parties as well as the formation of new ones.
- The attempt to implement hudud in Kelantan state which led to the ultimate split of Pakatan Rakyat bolstered the Islamist PAS' President Hadi Awang's standing and revitalised the party hard-line conservatives.
- The PAS progressives who were defeated by the conservatives are now left with the option of either forming a new party or joining an existing political party.

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- An alliance between PAS and UMNO is being and will continue to be debated. However, a decision for the two to form a coalition lies more with UMNO than PAS. The litmus test for Prime Minister Najib Razak lies in how he balances between allying with PAS on the one hand, and maintaining the support of the East Malaysian voting bloc on the other.
- The Democratic Action Party (DAP) is likely to seek new alliances to preserve the credibility of its ambition to transform Malaysia, for fear that it would return to being a standalone party in Malaysian politics.
- The frailties of the third PR party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), to stabilise opposition coalition politics are apparent now that it can no longer rely on its chieftain, the imprisoned Anwar Ibrahim, to provide the statesmanship needed in mediating the tension between the conservatives in PAS and the liberals in DAP.
- PKR is likely to embark on an exercise of critical self-examination. As a party in search of an identity, it could find 'secular Islam' to be a plausible answer which would set it apart from both PAS and DAP. Clarity in its ideological identity could then augment its bargaining position in the coalition-building process.
- PR's collapse has resuscitated, and perhaps even bolstered, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional's foothold in Malaysian politics, its own internal politicking notwithstanding.

INTRODUCTION

Pakatan Rakyat (PR) – a triumvirate coalition of strange bedfellows with differing ideologies – is dead in the water. Formed in 2008, PR was perceived as a viable alternative to the Barisan Nasional (BN) in governing Malaysia. However, it collapsed with the intensification of tensions between the Islamist Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) under the leadership of Hadi Awang and the staunchly secularist Democratic Action Party (DAP) over the implementation of hudud (harsh punishments for crimes in congruence with Islamic penal code) in the state of Kelantan. The writing was on the wall when the PAS leadership was captured by hard-line conservatives at the party's 61st Annual Mukhtamar (General Assembly), who subsequently decided to sever ties with the DAP. Soon after, DAP's Secretary-General Lim Guan Eng declared that PR had collapsed. In Lim's words, "As Pakatan Rakyat was formed by the three parties based on consensus and bound by the Common Policy Framework, the PAS Mukhtamar's motion effectively killed off Pakatan Rakyat."² Reaffirming the collapse was the President of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, People's Justice Party), Wan Azizah who proclaimed that "PR no longer functions formally."³

The collapse of Pakatan Rakyat (PR) carries great significance for the future of opposition coalition politics in Malaysia. Several attempts are to be expected at regrouping and realignment of existing political parties as well as the formation of new ones, before general elections are called, latest by 2018. While party-political realignments are not alien to Malaysia, the main difference now is that the realignments appear to be more fluid and complex.

QUO VADIS, PAS?

First, PR's collapse had no bearing on the standing of the hard-line conservatives within PAS. In fact, the politicisation of hudud that led to PR's disintegration bolstered Hadi Awang's standing within PAS and revitalised PAS as a party of the ultraconservatives. The pursuit of hudud underlined the message to many PAS' members and supporters that Hadi was a leader with a plan to refashion an identity not just for himself, but also for the party. This seemed necessary after the passing of Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the eminent guardian of PAS, widened the rift between the conservative ulama faction and the more progressive group within PAS. But while there was a closing of ranks within PAS to defend Hadi against a barrage of criticism on the enactment of hudud in Kelantan⁴, notably from the DAP, the factionalism within PAS remain unabated. This internal rift came to the fore in the party's 61st Annual Mukhtamar whereby the purge of the progressives by the ulamas (clergy class) led to a near-total wipe-out of the progressives within PAS. As many as 22 of the 23 posts contested for PAS' central

² *Straits Times*, 2015. Malaysian opposition alliance no longer exists, says DAP's Lim Guan Eng. June 16.

³ *The Rakyat Post*, 2015. PKR no longer functions formally, says PKR president. June 17.

⁴ This is not a new bill; rather, this current round of the hudud controversy is about an amendment to the 1993 hudud bill.

working committee were won by the ulamas, with the sole PAS progressive leader stepping down soon after.⁵ PAS has thus moved further to the right, with the ulamas now singlehandedly calling the shots. One notable illustration was the motion passed for PAS to sever ties with the DAP, effectively ending the coalition pact. These developments were also disconcerting to non-Muslim supporters of PAS who, as a congress, have been rethinking their position within the party and may well end up joining the PAS progressives.⁶

Second, PR's demise pushed the progressives within PAS to either form their own party, or join up with an existing party. Central to their thinking is the paramount importance of PR to coalition politics in Malaysia, and as the attendant vehicle to wrest control of Putrajaya from BN. For them, it is only by remaining in PR and working with the other two component parties that they can contribute to a regime change. This line of thinking also guided Nik Aziz's decision to desist from pressing on with the implementation of hudud, despite him being a conservative Muslim cleric. Nik Aziz's friendship with Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of the PR coalition, as well his cordial working relationship with DAP's Lim Kit Siang was crucial in keeping the coalition intact. Hence, when Nik Aziz passed on and Anwar was jailed, PR was thrown into disarray.

In response, PAS progressive leaders started to think of ways to resuscitate PR, or to create some pact resembling PR. For example, they may turn the pro-PR Islamic NGO, Persatuan Ummah Sejahtera Malaysia (PasMa) into a fully-fledged political party, with the aim of replacing the traditional PAS in an all-new opposition pact with DAP and PKR. Another example is the formation of G18, an informal network of PAS progressives defeated by the ulamas during the party elections, which seeks to form a new party to rival the traditional PAS party for voter-support in the Kelantan stronghold. As elucidated by Hatta Ramli, a G18 member, "we do not want to take a confrontational approach, we only want to project an alternative image of an Islamic political party which is inclusive and acceptable within a multiracial setting."⁷ Given its vision for the future of PAS as a moderate and inclusive party, PasMa has indicated its willingness to work with the G18 grouping to form a consolidated party to replace PAS in PR. G18 has since morphed into a new movement called 'Gerakan Harapan Baru (GHB)', which, in turn, could coalesce into a political party. This party could then work with the two other opposition parties and form what is now commonly described as Pakatan 2.0. However, how this new PAS-alternative party performs in electoral politics is an open question. Historically, breakaway factions from PAS like Hamim and Berjasa tend to perform poorly at the polls. Moreover, newly-formed parties often take time to relate and be amenable to the electorate. So although there is still time before GE14 is held, it would be difficult for PAS splinter groups to get significant support from conservative Malays who prefer the status quo.

⁵ *The Malaysian Insider*, 2015. Sole PAS 'progressive' leader quits central committee post. June 15.

⁶ For example, the co-founder of the PAS supporters' congress for non-Muslims, Hu Pang Chaw has left the party because he felt it had strayed from its path of 'PAS for All'. *Free Malaysia Today*, 2015. PAS loses supporters' wing co-founder. July 18.

⁷ *The Malaysian Insider*, 2015. Sole PAS 'progressive' leader quits central committee post. June 15.

Another alternative, as is already evident with a couple of PAS activists joining DAP, is for PAS progressives to defect to one of the two existing opposition parties.

As a counter-move, Hadi's PAS adopted a carrot-and-stick approach to deal with various splits and defections. Taking a hard-line approach, Nik Abduh Nik Aziz, the PAS Youth Chief, called on PAS' top brass to "cleanse the party of bad elements", that is, the "loud mouth" liberals.⁸ No wonder then that the ex-Deputy President of PAS, Mat Sabu likened PAS' party elections to "ethnic cleansing."⁹ Taking an incentive-based approach, PAS' leadership invited members from the moderate 'Erdogan' faction of PAS like Salahuddin Ayub, Mahfuz Omar and Taufek Ghani to join the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of PAS. It was hoped that by co-opting some progressives into the CEC, Hadi and his ilk could stem the tide of splits and defections since the party's 61st Annual Muktamar. Ultimately however, Hadi's PAS feels that the core of the party, held together by the ulamas, is strong enough to withstand any breakaways at the periphery.¹⁰ For Hadi's PAS, the 'bad elements' are merely a drop in the ocean.

Third, PR's rupture revived talk of an alliance between PAS and UMNO. It can be said that the PAS-UMNO alliance has always been on the cards, but it has not progressed in large part because of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on the one hand, and, on the other, the late-Nik Aziz, who preferred an opposition coalition pact to an alliance with UMNO. That PAS and UMNO had been in coalition before in the early 1970s under the leadership of Asri Muda and Tun Abdul Razak respectively and contested in the 1974 Malaysian GE under a single banner suggests that a potential alliance pact from now to GE14 should not be ruled out. However, the then-marriage of convenience between UMNO and PAS was short-lived, primarily because of the internal strife within PAS. In particular, 'Young Turks' in PAS deduced that cooperation with UMNO was an impediment in PAS pushing forward its agenda for the Islamicisation of Malaysia.¹¹ Be that as it may, the potential for a revived UMNO-PAS alliance is contingent on two primary considerations.

The first is the 'Hadi' factor. Just as Hadi was willing to work with UMNO to execute his hudud agenda, he was ready to enter into some form of unity pact with UMNO to govern Malaysia so long as the goal for enacting hudud in Kelantan remained a top priority. Tellingly, Hadi and Haron Din, the spiritual leader of PAS, came to the defence of Prime Minister Najib Razak when he was besieged by embezzlement allegations arising from a Wall Street Journal report, although the party did immediately after deny backing Najib.¹² The second is the capture of the Malay vote. In the main, the recent hudud controversy sought

⁸ *The Sun Daily*, 2015. How far can G18 go in the altered political landscape?. July 1.

⁹ *New Straits Times*, 2015. Mat Sabu likens Pas muktamar to "ethnic cleansing". June 20.

¹⁰ *Free Malaysia Today*, 2015. Shahbudin: Ulama in PAS out to divide and rule. June 23.

¹¹ Liow, Joseph Chinyong, 2015. *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, p. 33.

¹² *The Star Online*, 2015. PAS: Our statements are not in support of Najib. July 7.

to make Hadi's PAS a relevant party for Malay voters.¹³ As such, there is an element of truth in the claim that PAS' fixation with hudud was a political ruse to fish for Malay votes.¹⁴ This is despite the fact that the historical record shows that the attempt to push for hudud in Terengganu in 2002 did not win the party many Malay votes in the 2004 GE. Moreover, despite the caution issued by the DAP that the hudud agenda would result in PAS losing the support of non-Malay/Muslims and so, losing mixed parliamentary seats, it has in fact not bothered PAS in electoral terms. This could suggest that for the sake of hudud, PAS is still contented with just shoring up its traditional Malay support base. Arguably, the thinking of the pro-Hadi faction within PAS is that if the implementation of hudud enhances PAS' capacity to govern effectively in Kelantan, Malay support for PAS, chiefly from the northern belt in Malaysia and in particular, the states of Terengganu and Kedah, would follow suit in future Malaysian GEs.

Also, while UMNO has traditionally steadfastly opposed hudud being implemented in Malaysia, especially under Mahathir's premiership, it seems currently more ambiguous about the matter.¹⁵ Not only had 12 Kelantan UMNO lawmakers supported the passing of the hudud bill in the State, but several UMNO Ministers have publicly expressed their support as well.¹⁶ Importantly, Prime Minister Najib has been tight-lipped about the hudud issue. Given that Najib won the 13th General Elections (GE13) largely due to the Malay vote, there would be an irresistible temptation for him to augment this support prior to the next elections.¹⁷ Crucial in this regard could be the option of UMNO forming a political pact with PAS. But the caveat here is that if Najib chooses to ally with PAS and in so doing, concedes to PAS on the hudud implementation in Kelantan, this could culminate in a pushback by the BN parties from Sabah and Sarawak and the Bumiputera Christians who are against the hudud taking root in Malaysia. Given how incredibly important Sabah and Sarawak had been for BN to retain its grip on Putrajaya in GE13, UMNO cannot be indifferent to anti-hudud voices coming from there. In fact, Sabah and Sarawak may have become even more important for BN in electoral terms than the Malay vote. For BN, losing Sabah and Sarawak is as good as losing Putrajaya. Hence, the litmus test for Najib is how he threads the needle between entering into an alliance with PAS on the one hand, and maintaining the support of the East Malaysian voting bloc on the other. Consider also the dilemma of sharing Malay-majority seats between UMNO and PAS should the two form a coalition. This problem will remain a

¹³ One caveat here is that the contra-Hadi factions (the moderates) within PAS want the party to cater to all races and religions. *TODAY*, 2015. PAS moderates launch new movement for all races, religious. July 13.

¹⁴ Kaos, Joseph, 2015. Tun M: PAS' hudud is just to fish for votes. *The Star Online*. April 4.

¹⁵ There had been dissension within UMNO ranks in the past, particularly among Ministers overseeing religious affairs at the federal level. They were not opposed to hudud taking root in the country. See Saat, Norshahril, 2014. The Ulama, Thought-Styles, and the Islamic State Debate in Contemporary Malaysia. *Studia Islamika*, 21 (1), p. 59.

¹⁶ Asrul Hadi, Abdullah Sani, 2015. Hudud debate: Pressure mounting on Najib. *Straits Times (Singapore)*. March 23.

¹⁷ The UMNO-led BN won also because of support from Sabah and Sarawak, which houses a sizeable Christian bumiputra voting bloc. This bloc is represented by East Malaysian component political parties within BN.

thorny one. All in all, it remains more UMNO's decision than PAS' on whether or not such a pact is to be realised.

DAP GOING IT ALONE?

Fourth, PR's collapse led to the DAP looking for new alliances. To preserve its political integrity, the party has to be seen to be searching for a coalition that reflected its philosophical values, chief of which is secularism. Just as PAS will probably lose its non-Malay/non-Muslim support in pushing the hudud agenda, DAP accepting PAS' hudud initiative would have lost its substantial support from the ethnic Chinese and Christian community. History might very well repeat itself. In the 1999 Malaysian Elections, many Chinese voters deserted the DAP because it was in alliance with PAS under the Barisan Alternatif banner. PAS had refused to renounce publicly its goal of transforming Malaysia into an Islamic state, and seeing its chance, BN cautioned the Chinese that "a vote for DAP is a vote for PAS and an Islamic state."¹⁸ Similarly, it could be said that support for DAP is support for PAS and hudud as long as both were in the PR coalition pact. Hence, informal discussions have been held between DAP and like-minded members from PKR and PAS to give birth to Pakatan 2.0, which, at the time of writing, hinges on the framing of the GHB entity.

Fifth, PR's rupture triggered a rethink in the DAP about going it alone. That is, DAP could well return to the days when it was a standalone party. The clearest evidence of this portrayal came from Penang's Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng when he proclaimed that Penang is no longer a 'Pakatan state government' but rather a 'Penang state government' governed by DAP, which controls the Penang State Assembly.¹⁹ Presumably annoyed at PKR's stance on apportioning blame for PR's collapse to both PAS and DAP, DAP's leadership made some demands on Azmin Ali, Selangor's Chief Minister, before the party's working relationship with PKR could return to normalcy. For instance, Azmin had to declare the demise of PR and pressure PAS' Selangor state assemblymen to support the state government through a Common Policy Framework reminiscent of the old PR coalition. Azmin flatly rejected those demands, perhaps because he did not want to upset the national PAS leadership. This is because he requires the support of PAS to govern Selangor (PAS has the most seats in the state alongside DAP), his Gombak parliamentary seat being a PAS stronghold, and crucially, it was largely intervention and support from PAS that made Azmin the Chief Minister of Selangor at the expense of Wan Azizah in 2014. To be sure, there is also a sizeable presence of PAS progressives in Selangor so Azmin could hedge his bets by allying, at the state level, with PAS progressives aligned with the GHB.

Given the ambivalence in PKR's position vis-à-vis PAS, one plausible scenario appears to be for DAP to go it alone as a standalone party. Doing so means that DAP does not need to

¹⁸ Cited in Case, William, 2002. *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, p. 140.

¹⁹ *New Straits Times*, 2015. Penang no longer a Pakatan govt, declares Guan Eng. July 2.

sacrifice its core philosophical values of secular democracy and meritocracy. Moreover, as a standalone party, DAP can make further electoral inroads, particularly in those constituencies that have a Chinese-majority as was the case in GE13, including in Johor State, an UMNO-led BN stronghold. In fact, Johor is likely to evolve into a racially-polarised battlefield between UMNO and DAP with the former capturing the bulk of the Malay vote while the latter captures the majority of the Chinese vote.²⁰ The downside to going it alone is that DAP is unlikely to secure a majority in the Federal Parliament and by extension, replace the BN regime in Putrajaya because the Malays, particularly the more conservative ones, are unlikely to vote for a Chinese-dominated political party. Therefore, if DAP were to go it alone, the best possible outcome in GE14 would be that the party would continue to rule Penang State, capturing each and every seat with a sizeable Chinese majority, and make further inroads in East Malaysia. Latest developments suggest that DAP will join hands with PKR and GHB to form Pakatan 2.0.

PKR, THE STABILISING PIVOT?

Sixth, PR's collapse exposed the frailties of PKR as a stabilising pivot for opposition coalition politics in the post-Anwar period. Crucially, PKR can no longer rely on the imprisoned Anwar Ibrahim to provide the necessary statesmanship in mediating between PAS and DAP. As stated earlier, Anwar's incarceration was a hugely important contributing factor to the collapse of the PR. The role of saving the failing coalition was most likely to fall to Azmin Ali, who as PKR's Deputy President and Chief Minister of Selangor has the required stature as well as the apparent nod from both the DAP and PAS camps. But discord between the faction loyal to PKR President Wan Azizah, who also happens to be Anwar's wife, and the faction supporting Azmin, made this difficult. All the more so when Azmin emerged victorious in the leadership struggle for the Chief Ministership of Selangor, much to the chagrin of Wan Azizah, who was the party's officially preferred choice for that position. Be that as it may, Azmin Ali and Wan Azizah have both attempted to salvage the PR coalition, but have achieved little success thus far. Moreover, Azmin has been caught in the crossfire between DAP and PAS, which have steadfastly refused to work with one another, and have also called on Azmin to choose sides in the conflict as far as governing of the Selangor State is concerned. Quite sensibly, Azmin has dismissed any suggestions of choosing sides. Rather, what is likely to happen and this is already taking place, is that Azmin will adopt a dual-track approach to governing Selangor. On the one hand, PKR works with DAP, and, on the other, PKR works with PAS. Doing so forecloses the need for DAP and PAS to work with one another, with PKR playing the role of a pivot to stabilise the state government.

Seventh, PR's demise compelled PKR to embark on an exercise of critical self-examination. PKR is a party in search of an identity. What does it stand for, and what is its chosen

²⁰ Mustafa Izzuddin, 2015. A Jewel in the Barisan Nasional Crown: An Electoral Analysis of Four Parliamentary Seats in Johor. In Saravanamuttu, Johan, Lee, Hock Guan, and Nawab, Osman. *Coalitions in Collision: Malaysia's 13th General Elections*. Malaysia: SIRD and Singapore: ISEAS, p. 270.

ideology? PKR has often been accused in more recent times of leaning over backwards for both DAP and PAS just so the PR coalition pact could remain intact. In so doing however, PKR has been losing its credibility. So, in a sense, PR's collapse allows PKR to either reform or reaffirm its ideological identity of being secularist or Islamist, or being somewhere in between.²¹ Notably, PKR's perceived centrist position has not been entirely fruitful, as seen in the collapse of PR. One possibility now is for PKR to redefine itself as a party with 'secular Islam' as its ideological identity.²² Despite being paradoxical, this controversial phrase warrants greater deliberation in light of the evolutionary nature of Malaysia's political landscape. According to one of the more simplified definitions, secular Islam "means that the collection of beliefs, moral values and teachings which comprise Islam do not confer on Muslims a mission to form a government or state. The idea of establishing an Islamic state based on the Quran and the *Sunnah* is incorrect, as neither presents a model for such a state."²³ By that definition, secular Islam sets PKR apart from PAS, which, in its puritanical predisposition, considers secularism to be un-Islamic. Concurrently, secular Islam differentiates PKR from DAP because secular Islam appears to present a 'softer' form of secularism as compared to the more staunch variant espoused by the DAP. Despite the differences, such projected clarity by PKR about its ideological identity could bolster its bargaining position in the coalition-building process. But while secular Islam can help PKR secure support from the more progressive Malays and Muslims of other races, it alienates the more conservative Malays who would probably find secular Islam abnormal and abhorrent. As such, PKR, as a standalone party, is unlikely to garner the necessary support to secure a simple majority in the Federal Parliament, although the party should be able to retain the more urbanised electoral seats, especially in Selangor.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Taken collectively, the implications from the Pakatan Rakyat collapse presented here suggest that one will see several rounds of regrouping and realignment of existing political parties as well as formation of new ones. All eyes are now on Pakatan 2.0 and in particular on whether it will be PAS or some breakaway faction such as GHB that will be represented in the coalition. Prime Minister Najib Razak may have been under fire over funds allegedly ending up in his personal accounts, as reported by the Wall Street Journal, and suffered other challenges to his political leadership, but he may well ride out the storm, aided by the opposition coalition being in chaos at the same time. The BN is also in disarray, worsened by Najib's recent removal of his deputy, Muhyiddin Yassin.

²¹ See Saat, Norshahril, 2015. With Pakatan dead, it's time for PKR to reaffirm its ideology. *TODAY*. June 19.

²² Some analysts would counter-argue that since PKR, even under Anwar Ibrahim, has all along been non-committal to any clearly-defined ideology, why would the party bother with one now?

²³ Ganji, Akbar, 2015. Why secularism is compatible with the Quran and Sunnah – And an 'Islamic State' is not. *The Huffington Post*. January 27.

According to a Malay proverb, ‘gajah sama gajah berjuang, pelanduk mati di tengah-tengah’, which translated metaphorically means that when leaders fight, it is the people who suffer the most. By the same token, when PR and BN both suffer internal strife, it is the Malaysian people who are the most affected. PR’s collapse left many Malaysians disappointed, including middle-ground voters. For them, the question has to be asked, if PR cannot even stay united as a coalition, how can they be expected to govern the country? It is reasonable to assume that PR parties have lost some middle-ground support to BN. PR’s demise reaffirms BN as the only game in town.

So, all things considered, it is the opinion of the author that despite being ‘under siege’, Najib remains the best bet at the moment to lead Malaysia as Prime Minister. This is because Najib has shown promising signs of reform in the early part of his tenure and continued the work of his predecessors in the conduct of a foreign policy that projects Malaysia as a respectable middle power in international affairs.²⁴ Most of all, Najib retains the majority support of UMNO and BN as a whole.²⁵ Only time will tell what ultimately becomes of Najib, but PR’s collapse has resuscitated, and perhaps even bolstered, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional, its own internal politicking notwithstanding.

²⁴ Najib Abdul Razak, 2014. 8th Heads of Mission Conference. *Speech by Prime Minister of Malaysia*, February 24.

²⁵ This support may have moderated somewhat with the recent Cabinet reshuffle, particularly the removal of the Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

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