

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Will Malaysia's New Islamist Party Reshape the Political Landscape?

By Hew Wai Weng\*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On 16 September 2015, a group of dissatisfied leaders of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) left the party to form Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah). This comes in the wake of the demise of the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR).
- This new party, along with the recently formed UMNO-splinter party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu), can potentially reshape the Malay Muslim political landscape.
- Making common cause with the other parties that had constituted PR, namely the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti KeAdilan Rakyat (KeAdilan), Amanah helped found Pakatan Harapan, effectively replacing PAS in the opposition coalition.
- Quickly put to the test in two simultaneous by-elections in the semi-rural constituencies of Sungai Besar in Selangor and Kuala Kangsar in Perak, Amanah managed to win about two-thirds of Chinese votes but secured less than 10 per cent of the Malay Muslim vote.
- Amanah promotes an inclusive and democratic Islamism and upholds Maqasid Sharia, which focuses on issues such as social justice and good governance. It faces difficult challenges though. The party lacks resources to gain grassroots support and improve its electoral machinery and needs to enhance its Islamic credibility in order to compete with PAS.
- The first-past-the-post electoral system practised in Malaysia also leaves little room for new parties to grow.

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## THE BIRTH OF AMANAH

The progressive faction in Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) lost almost all its positions during the party's 2015 election. On 16 September, its most prominent figures left the party to establish Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah).

A month later, Amanah, together with the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti KeAdilan Rakyat, formed a new opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH). The old one, Pakatan Rakyat (PR), fell apart earlier in the year when PAS chose to push the issue of *Hudud* in parliament.

Positioning itself as a progressive and inclusive Islamist party, Amanah seeks to present an Islamist alternative to PAS, whose discourses are dogmatic and exclusive.

To be sure, Amanah is not starting from scratch. It has six Members of Parliament, although all of them were elected as PAS members in the 2013 general election. Amanah's founding president Mohammad Sabu, deputy president Salahuddin Ayub and one of its three vice presidents, Mujahid Yusof Rawa, all held key positions in PAS before their defeat in the party election. The two other vice presidents, Hasanuddin Mohd Yunus and Hasan Baharom, are key players in Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia (IKRAM), a reformist Muslim organisation, and Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) respectively. IKRAM and ABIM are the two main Muslim NGOs in Malaysia.

Many other Amanah leaders, such as Mujahid Yusof Rawa, Dzulkefly Ahmad, Hatta Ramli and Khalid Samad are well equipped with Islamic knowledge and professional training. The outspoken former PAS vice president Husam Musa has also joined Amanah recently. These figures have excelled at debating public policy in parliament, engaging with various NGOs and articulating Islamic discourses within modern contexts. They are also popular among many non-Muslims and some segments of urban Muslims.

Their support in rural Malay areas are not strong, however. They also lack resources to challenge PAS, which is strongly supported by a network of kindergartens, schools, universities, mosques and villages built up over many years. Many PAS members, though expressly unhappy with the current leadership, continue to be loyal to the party for diverse reasons.

## FAILURE IN THE BY-ELECTIONS

The first test for Amanah came on 18 June 2016, when by-elections were simultaneously in Kuala Kangsar in Perak and Sungai Besar in Selangor, both Malay-majority ethnically-mixed constituencies. In multi-cornered contests between the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), PAS and Amanah, Amanah failed to win, and UMNO managed to retain the two seats, beating its opponents with an increased majority.

Amanah did better than PAS in Sungai Besar. This was a small consolation though, because although won the support of about two-thirds of Chinese voters, it gained less than 10 per cent of Malay votes. In other words, it failed to sway traditional UMNO and PAS supporters to its side.

Many factors contributed to the victory of UMNO. First, Pakatan Harapan leaders failed to whip up the enthusiasm that inspired Malaysians in 2013 to vote for a change of government. Furthermore, UMNO's strong electoral machinery and money politics guaranteed its hold over rural voters.

In Kuala Kangsar, Amanah had to rely on DAP and KeAdilan to engage with Chinese voters, and on former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is now on an anti-Najib campaign, to win it the support of UMNO members. The party's own workers and leaders did not frequent the villages and its rallies targeting Malay voters were poorly attended.

PAS, on the other hand, despite losing significant non-Muslim support, kept its traditional vote base which consists of about 30 percent of Malay Muslim voters. Some see this as support for 'Hadi's bill', a parliamentary motion tabled by PAS president Hadi Awang to enhance the 1965 Shariah Court (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act. However, this is too simple a conclusion. After all, PAS supporters stayed true to the party in the last two general elections, even though the party did not openly campaign for a stricter implementation of Islamic criminal law at either time. Similarly, it is unfair to conclude from the by-elections that many Muslims do not support the idea of inclusive Islamism promoted by Amanah. Religion is an important factor, but not the only one that determines the voting preference of Malay Muslims.

The results of the two by-elections hint at a certain direction in the development in Malaysian oppositional politics. PAS's vote base remained intact while it lost most of its non-Muslim support. If this drop in non-Muslim support applies throughout the country, then PAS risks losing many mixed seats in the next elections, especially in Selangor. At the same time, confidence over retaining 30% support from Malay Muslims in both urban and rural areas will discourage party hardliners from compromising on seat allocations with other opposition parties, especially Amanah. The subsequent split in the Malay opposition will benefit the UMNO.

Already, Amanah's inability to swing PAS voters has led some KeAdilan leaders to maintain a working relationship with PAS, and the failure of Amanah to attract UMNO voters has motivated Mahathir Mohamad to establish a new Malay-based party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia to mount a proper challenge to UMNO.

## INCLUSIVE ISLAM

Electoral under-performance does not mean that Amanah does not have an important role to play in Malaysian politics. The inclusive and democratic Islamism that it promotes is important, inspiring and timely. Amanah's establishment has added diversity to the topic and the practice of political Islam—locally and globally. In Malaysia, the Islamisation race between PAS and UMNO has always focused on the enforcement of moral control and the strengthening of Islamic law. Instead of concentrating on divisive issues such as *Hudud*, Amanah upholds Maqasid Syariah, a concept that highlights Islamic values such as social justice, good governance and multicultural co-existence. Their articulation of an inclusive Islam does not mean that Amanah leaders have abandoned Islamist ideologies. Instead it demonstrates their wish to make Islam relevant in contemporary contexts and to promote social inclusivity within Islamic frameworks.

Amanah leaders promote the motto of ‘Amanah, Progresif, Peduli’ (Trustworthy, Progressive, Caring) and presents Islam as a religion that bestows blessings on all. Such an inclusive discourse is not new, not even for PAS. The leaders who have now formed Amanah, had with the support of the late PAS spiritual leader Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, popularised the ideas of ‘PAS of all’ and ‘welfare state’ that rebranded PAS and expanded its appeal to non-Muslim voters in recent years. This had led to clashes with dogmatic faction in the party who argue that that ‘PAS is for the believers’ and insist on the struggle for an ‘Islamic State’.

During the last two general elections, despite disagreements, both factions worked together and complemented each other – the progressives appealed to non-Muslims and moderate Muslims, while the dogmatic faction spoke to the party traditional supporters. The split occasioned by the party elections last year turned this tactical wish to cooperate into a desire to compete with each other.

Despite its ideal of inclusive Islam, Amanah faces challenges in raising its appeal and popularity. First of all, it has to work within the constraints of Malaysia’s first-past-the-post electoral system, which gives little room for a new party to grow. In contrast, the proportional representation system in Indonesia, backed by unique socio-historical factors, allow a number of different Islamic-based parties to flourish there, and to compete with each other. In Malaysia, unless a new party is able to negotiate with existing opposition parties to ensure a straight fight with the ruling coalition, it is unlikely to perform well electorally. While Amanah appeals to non-Malays and some segments of urban Malay voters, its support base does not seem strong enough to deliver it electoral success, especially if PAS chooses not to compromise with it over seat allocations.

Second, Amanah lacks financial and human resources to build up its grassroots support and improve its electoral machinery. The party lacks *ulama*, female and youth figures that can help them address different segments of voters. Amanah leaders have no doubt run seminars and published articles to promote Maqasid Syariah, yet they have failed to convince the broader Malay Muslim population that the concepts involved are relevant to them. Third,

Amanah faces an uphill task in debunking the perception that it is ‘DAP’s agent’ and to enhance its Islamic credentials in order to compete with PAS. It is trying though, and has approached many Muslim NGOs, such as ABIM and IKRAM, to support the party.

The political role of Muslim NGOs are often downplayed by pundits. IKRAM and ABIM, along with Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA) are three organisations that have been influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. Although they share an Islamisation agenda and similar member profiles (educated urban middle-class Malay Muslims), they differ in their political strategies and affiliations. ABIM is politically fragmented, ISMA is pro-establishment, while IKRAM appears to be closely linked to opposition parties. Many IKRAM leaders have joined KeAdilan, PAS, and now Amanah. In the Kuala Kangsar by-election, Amanah’s candidate Ahmad Termizi Ramli was an important figure in IKRAM, and many IKRAM members campaigned for him. An IKRAM member informed this author during the by-elections that ‘in the past, we joined PAS and KeAdilan; now, we form Amanah’. It is quite clear that both Amanah and IKRAM share a similar approach to political Islam, and several Amanah and IKRAM members expressed to this author the identical argument that “we are not as dogmatic as PAS, yet we are not as liberal as SIS (Sisters in Islam). And unlike UMNO, we are not racist”.

### **“BERSATU” AS ALTERNATIVE TO UMNO?**

In both the Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar by-elections, some opposition leaders expected many UMNO supporters to abandon UMNO because of their dissatisfaction with Prime Minister Najib Razak. Yet, the results showed the opposite to be true. The poor showing by Amanah led former UMNO leaders led by Mahathir Mohamad and Muhyiddin Yassin to establish Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia a pointedly Malay-based party, to compete directly with UMNO. The assumption is that only an expressly Malay-based party can capture UMNO’s vote bank.

Just as Amanah was formed as an alternative to the Islamist PAS, Bersatu is founded to undermine UMNO. But while Amanah has committed to promoting inclusive Islam to differentiate itself from PAS, it is yet unclear how *Bersatu* will distinguish itself from UMNO ideologically.

While race and religious issues are undeniably important, the urban-rural dimension may be just as important. UMNO succeeds in rural areas, and rural people tend to be more concerned about bread and butter issues, rather national topics and policy matters. That being the case, rural patronage networks play a big role in delivering votes.

The assumption that KeAdilan and Amanah are not ‘Malay’ enough, and therefore the opposition needs a more Malay-centric party such as Bersatu to defeat UMNO in rural areas is problematic. And while UMNO often plays racial cards in election campaigns, what have contributed to its electoral success are money politics and rural patronage. Similarly, PAS

has been managed to challenge UMNO in certain rural areas, not only because of its Islamist ideology, but also because of its strong grassroots support.

Whichever the case, the establishment of Amanah and Bersatu (currently under registration) does add to the diversity of Malay Muslim politics in Malaysia which is currently dominated by the Malay nationalist party UMNO, the Islamist party PAS and the multicultural centrist party KeAdilan.

To what extent this changes mind-sets and the centrality of racial discourses remains to be seen. UMNO leaders and newspapers tend to portray the Chinese support for the DAP (and to a lesser extent, for KeAdilan) and the DAP's dominant position within Pakatan Harapan as a threat to the political position of Malay Muslims. While racial issues may not be the main consideration for voters, perceptions of threat may cause some Malay Muslims to stay with UMNO however unhappy they may be with its current leadership.

Hope for a better alternative in the 2013 general elections brought historical success to the unified opposition front. But since then, frustration with the fragmented opposition makes it difficult to predict how the next general elections will be.

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