

Did Malaysians Vote Islamists? Reflections on PAS and AMANAH in the 2018 General Election

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Abstract: In the latest general elections held in May 2018, PAS and the newly formed Islamist party, the AMANAH won the plurality of votes and managed to secure a number of legislative seats in the parliament and states. With the fall of BN and Najib Razak's administration, as well as the victory of Pakatan Harapan, there was relatively moderate support for dominant Islamist candidates within PAS and AMANAH. Compared to previous elections, the increased number of seats in the 2018 elections, both in the parliament and state assembly had indirectly reflected the continuous trend of support towards political Islam in certain parliamentary areas, particularly on the east coast of Malaysia. Apart from corruptions issues linked to the previous regime, reasons for this trend could stem from the 'familiar faces' factor along with political bargaining between coalition party members which aided Islamists to deliberately maintain their presence in the Malaysian political game.

Introduction

Islam in Malaysia has developed in a religious environment where it is the faith of the vast majority of the population. It is important to note that even though Malaysia is a multi-racial and multi-religious country, Islam is dominant both politically and culturally amongst its adherents and the majority Malay-Muslim citizens. Given the growing popularity of Islamic activism across the Muslim world, popular perspectives on the direction of Islam, as represented by alternative voices, caught the attention of Islamists in Malaysia. In fact, the increasing visibility of Islam in Malaysian politics is driven by the established Islamist party, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). In addition, alternative actors such as the new progressive Islamist party, the National Trust Party (AMANAH) are also increasingly 'weighing in' due to the discursive nature of Islamisation and its politicisation in Malaysia today. These 'Islamically inspired' parties are seen as politically committed in order to gain support within the Muslim population as well as from the non-Muslims in Malaysia. Although their activism might be diverse in terms of ideology, political approach and political activism, these actors from PAS and AMANAH have made a great contribution to the dynamics of the Islamic political discourse and the progress of electoral democracy in the country. The following discussion will highlight the differences between these two parties within the backdrop of political Islam in Malaysia.

PAS versus AMANAH

The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), also known in Malay as Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, is a particularly insightful example of the complexity, cultural creativity and diversification

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of contemporary Islamist movements in the 21st century Muslim world. For nearly six decades, the party has been progressively prominent among Muslims in the Malaysian political arena. It was officially established prior to Malaysian independence on November 24th, 1951. Since its establishment, the party has dominated the discourse on political Islam in the country. PAS, which is currently led by Abdul Hadi Awang is the only Islamist opposition party that has remained in political rivalry in Malaysia since the first general election in 1955.

Politically suppressed by the previous Malaysian regime, PAS has gradually evolved from year to year to meet new challenges and excelled in playing the “democratic game” in the country. It has done this not by winning overwhelming electoral victories as can be seen in the past elections, but by remaining a viable political force for over fifty-five years despite the challenges posed previously by Malaysia’s semi-democratic system. As an established ideological party, PAS believes strongly in Islam, Islamism or political Islam as its basis and doctrine and in this way the party often differentiates itself from other non-Islamic oriented political parties in Malaysia. PAS leaders have repeatedly stressed that Islam is not only about ritual, prayer and worshipping Allah – the religion should be perceived as a way of life. For PAS, Islam is not merely a system of beliefs and dogmas to which to strictly adhere, but also a programme for action with a definite purpose and an objective for all Muslims. Thus, since its formation, PAS has seen Islam as an

embodiment of every principle of life - be it politics, economics or social matters.¹

The National Trust Party, commonly and officially known in Malay as Parti Amanah Negara or “AMANAH”, on the other hand is a newly-registered Islamist political party promoting the approach of moderate and progressive political Islam. The party was originally founded as the Malaysia Workers’ Party before being handed over in August 2015 to a group of Islamists who prior were members and top leaders of PAS. The party’s main ideology reflects progressive and moderate political Islam, which emphasizes the importance of openness, tolerance and inclusiveness in all layers of society and amongst the multi-religious citizens in Malaysia - as long as Islam is respected as the party’s core values. The party acknowledges that it is necessary to respect all views regardless of religion and that there is a need to negotiate different political ideas and approaches within a liberal democratic framework.

Although the efforts to attract more non-Muslim supporters seems pragmatic, the party managed to differentiate itself from PAS in terms of reform and renewal (islah and tajdid), or at least by trying to adopt the idea of neo-Islamism, since the ultimate goal of the party is no longer focused on the issue of sharia law or the creation of an Islamic state. Leaders within AMANAH have repeatedly stressed that the defence of basic civil liberties and political rights in a multicultural and multi-religious country is the new party’s top priority².

Fragmented Islamist: Between Conservatives and Democrats

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along with the frustration of not being re-elected as the party's executive committee, the group led by former PAS Deputy President, Mohamad Sabu decided to leave PAS - leaving the latter to be a party mainly dominated by conservative Islamists or pro-Ulama'. This group who proclaimed themselves as 'progressive and professional' Islamists then officially established AMANAH as a newly Islamist democratic party on the 16th September 2015. The main reason for the internal split within PAS was the long standing ideological battle between the progressive and conservative factions³.

The conservative faction in PAS has been commonly labelled the "ulama' or religious scholars camp" – although there are also members who are not religiously educated. The Islamists within this camp generally adhere to a conservative interpretation of how Islam and political Islam should be applied to public policy especially on the issues of implementing sharia – which is often seen as an indirect practice of exclusivity against non-Muslims. The progressive faction on the other hand is widely known as the "professional camp" - implying that they come from professional and non-religious backgrounds (e.g. doctors, engineers, lawyers etc.). Leaders and members within this camp emphasize good governance, inclusivity towards non-Muslims and human rights, instead of being narrowly focused on the immediate implementation of sharia. They acknowledge that it is necessary to respect all views regardless of whether they come from Muslims or non-Muslims and that all these ideas need to be negotiated within a liberal democratic framework.

The May 2018 General Election

"The people had spoken! A new hope for Malaysia! Najib and Rosmah are going to jail!" These popular reactions could be seen in social media platforms in the early morning of May 10th, following the shocking defeat of the United Malay National Organisation-Barisan Nasional (UMNO-BN) coalition parties in the 2018 general election. Indeed, the trend toward support for political opposition has actually stalled in Malaysia, including toward Islamist parties such as PAS, especially in the post-2009 'political tsunami'. Since the 12th and 13th national elections in 2009 and 2013, the opposition and Islamic political sector as a whole—that is, the number of seats won by all opposition and Islamist candidates in each elections—has practically improved.

Regarding Malaysia's recent national election, it was undoubtedly sensational for many reasons. Not only did the election end six-decades of UMNO-BN political domination, it also brought back the 92 year old statesman and former premier Mahathir Mohamad to power. For the first time in Malaysia's post-independence political history, the new opposition coalition bloc, the Alliance of Hope (widely known in Malay as Pakatan Harapan or PH), including the Amanah Islamist which is officially in power. Momentously, long-time opposition leader, former Deputy Prime Minister and 'Islamically inspired' democracy activist, Anwar Ibrahim has also been pardoned and released from prison - enabling him to return to the Malaysian political arena with the prospect of taking over power from the current leadership in the near future, and possibly paving the way for the long-overdue political reform in the country.



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The 'New Malaysia' and opposition victory against the former BN regime

In general, Malaysian politics are essentially divided along the ethnic and ideological borders displayed by several ethnic-based political parties coupled with a few Islamist and secularist parties. Before the May 2018 election, the dominant party which ruled the government was the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a nationalist-Malay, right-wing party whose members secured the majority of seats in the state parliament. Through the practice of electoral authoritarianism which led to an uneven playing field for opposition parties including the PAS Islamists, the National Front (BN) coalition led by the UMNO has held power since Malaysian independence in 1957 and has won every general election that it has contested.

Nevertheless, the recent election had witnessed the previous ruling party losing ground to a new opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH) founded by Mahathir Mohamad in September 2015. At the parliamentary elections in May 2018, out of 222 seats contested, the five parties in PH (DAP, PKR, AMANAH, BERSATU, WARISAN) won the majority vote (121 seats) for the first time in Malaysian political history. Although the UMNO and BN lost the nationwide vote, through which they had governed Malaysia for nearly 60 years, the parties still held 79 parliamentary seats in the 'first past the post' electoral system, followed by PAS (18 seats) and independent candidates (4 seats). The

outcome of the 2018 General Election undoubtedly put PH as the sole winner and in a state of unchallenged⁴.

In many respects, the May 2018 general election was perceived as the by-product of the ultimate response and protest against the previous UMNO-BN regime. This was mainly due to past socioeconomic and political challenges thrown up by scores of controversial issues, for instance: major corruption by government officials; power abuses and wrongdoings by the ruling regime; UMNO's internal conflicts; the Prime Minister's National Fund (1MDB) scandal⁵; the sharp decline in Malaysia's currency; and price hikes in taxes and commodities, as well as the launch of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Bersih rallies which demanded that Najib Razak immediately resign from office. Since then Malaysian politics had looked less stable and more 'shaky' than it had for decades. Prior to the 2018 election, public dissatisfaction among Malaysians had also been fermenting in the country as the economy had shown significant inconsistency and there had been an escalation in political scandals. Amid all these unresolved issues, the Razak's regime had been constantly challenged by the opposition politicians and political activists, including the Islamists which finally led to the collapse of his party in the recent general election.

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Did Malaysians really vote for Islamists?

PAS and AMANAH are unquestionably regarded as the main Islamist parties in Malaysia comprising dynamic ideologies,

objectives and political approaches that fully participated in the 2018 general election. The voting outcome revealed that PAS alone had captured 18 parliamentary seats meanwhile AMANAH, as a new contender with ‘familiar faces’ had impressively secured 11 parliamentary seats. It is interesting to note that in the 2013 and 2008 election, PAS as a sole representative of Islamists gained 21 seats and 23 seats respectively. Thus, it was clear that the recent election had shown some positive progress on the development of Islamist parties in gaining voters’ trust.

14th Malaysian National Election –
Parliamentary Results for PAS and
AMANAH

Party	PAS	AMANAH
Total Seats won	18	11
Seats Contested	155	34
Voting Percentages	16.642	5.37

Source: Election Commission of Malaysia 2018

During the 2018 election, with the help of Pakatan Harapan coalition parties, AMANAH received quite reasonable support in several particular areas since the party had positioned a list of popular and well-known candidates such as Mohamad Sabu (Kota Raja), Khalid Abdul Samad (Shah Alam), Mohd Hatta Ramli (Lumut), Salahuddin Ayub (Pulai), Mujahid Yusuf Rawa (Parit Buntar) and Dzulkifly Ahmad (Kuala Selangor). On this basis, it appears fair to conclude that AMANAH and its coalition members had negotiated a clear distribution of seats: the PKR, PPBM and DAP would dominate the number of potential candidates in mix population areas, while AMANAH, as a new party would concentrate on competing with PAS in majority Malay-

Muslim areas. While this setup may not have made everyone happy as negotiations had clearly taken place a few months before the election, the reality was that this arrangement was a rather good basis from which to take the mission of ‘toppling’ the previous UMNO-BN regime in the May 2018 election process forward.

For PAS, despite being alone, the party also managed to increase certain seats in parliament and in the state assembly such as in Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah. This trend can be based on the ‘familiar Islamist faces’ to most voters in Malay-Muslim majority areas factor, since PAS also proved itself to be a ‘patronage party’ at the time of late Nik Abdul Aziz (former PAS spiritual leader) took over Kelantan from UMNO in the 1990s. Prior to the election, it was quite clear from the outset that some PAS candidates were going to have an easier time attracting voters than others, especially their AMANAH ‘counterparts’.

What is likely to happen in Malaysia with Islamist parties?

Events in contemporary Malaysia have exacerbated differences within Islamist parties. The progress of PAS and AMANAH nowadays presents further dynamics and diversity as regards ideology, organisational structure, political approach and ground activism. The values and policies promoted by Islamists in Malaysia may of course differ across parties. However,

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there is a single set of values that seems to be core to PAS and AMANAH in Malaysia. This set of values relates to the significance of Islam (or religion) in political and social life. On politico-religious grounds, it is possible to define PAS as politically conservative. This Islamist group seems consistently focused on Islamic roots and terminologies in line with championing the Islamic state agenda and the implementation of Sharia as a political ambition within the framework of democracy and election. AMANAH, as a new Islamist democratic party, is often perceived as politically accommodationist since the party pragmatically recognises major elements of democracy and individual freedom within the Islamic perspective as the basis of party struggle. This can be seen by its political strategy that emphasizes universal issues such as democracy, justice, good governance and multi-ethnic and religious interests without rhetorical expressions of Islam and Sharia.

With the next (15th) general election predicted to be held sometime, in 2023, there is already tremendous excitement building in anticipation of the ‘ideological and political’ battle between PAS and AMANAH which will compete for certain parliamentary and state assembly seats

The post-2018 General Election has indirectly posed a challenge for Malaysia’s Islamist parties to remain relevant and significant in the eyes of the general population. This is especially a concern for the non-Muslim community, since global political Islam and Islamist movements have usually been perceived negatively due to their tendency to resort to extremism and violence. Despite these formidable challenges, the recent national election undoubtedly reflects that Islamist parties in Malaysia have so

far remained determined and committed to their political struggle through democratic channels and refused to adopt violent and extreme methods to legitimize future goals – albeit with different political approaches. Personally, I believe this scenario is crucial to foreseeing (in some way) the future direction of PAS and AMANAH as popular Islamist parties in Malaysia within the context of democratic promotion. With the next (15th) general election predicted to be held sometime, in 2023, there is already tremendous excitement building in anticipation of the ‘ideological and political’ battle between PAS and AMANAH which will compete for certain parliamentary and state assembly seats. It is very likely that the trend of increased Islamist involvement in the Malaysian political spectrum will continue to take place for the next few years. Without any doubt, PAS and AMANAH will remain prominent Islamist political parties in the country – either in opposition or within the government block.



Endnotes

- 1- See PAS official website <https://pas.org.my/>. See also Farish A. Noor, “The Malaysian Islamic Party PAS 1951-2013” and Dominik M. Müller, “Islam Politics and Youth in Malaysia”.
- 2- See AMANAH official website <https://amanah.org.my/>
- 3- See Damien Kingsbury, “Politics in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Authority, Democracy and Political Change”.
- 4- See Malaysian Election Commission. <https://keputusan.spr.gov.my/>
- 5- See William Case, “Stress Testing Leadership in Malaysia: The 1MDB Scandal and Najib Tun Razak”.



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