

# PERSPECTIVE

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## The Ulama Leadership Model of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS): Perspectives of Key Leaders

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Facebook Page of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). Accessed 26 November 2024.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Key leaders within PAS believe in the necessity of ulama (religious scholars) leadership to maintain the party's alignment with Islamic principles. Interviews with selected PAS leaders reveal their conviction that this approach is essential to protect PAS' core values and to prevent deviation from its Islamic mission.
- There are dissenting voices, some arguing that the existing Majlis Syura Ulama suffices in ensuring that PAS continues with its vision and providing religious guidance to members. This was also the idea held by the "professional" faction led by Mohamad Sabu before it left PAS in 2015.
- The party's exclusivist ulama leadership can create tensions among ordinary Malaysians; between those uncomfortable with religious leadership in politics and conservative Malays, potentially limiting PAS's acceptance beyond its traditional Malay Muslim base. If PAS continues with its present trajectory, it cannot capture Putrajaya alone without the help of partners within and outside of Perikatan Nasional (PN).
- Alternatively, PAS can explore an inclusivist ulama leadership, which can ensure the party's appeal across Malaysia by promoting inter-ethnic harmony. It has a history of doing so, at least when the late Nik Aziz Nik Mat was PAS *mursyidul am* (spiritual guide). To mitigate sociopolitical tensions and enhance its national appeal, the party might explore a hybrid approach that does not necessarily require an ulama leadership model for the president but one where the leaders work closely with the Majlis Syura Ulama.

## INTRODUCTION

The Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) today stands at a crossroads as it seeks to firmly root itself in its traditional ulama leadership model. As PAS strives to uphold Islamic principles within Malaysia's multi-ethnic social configuration, the time has come for a transformative dialogue about its future leadership. Can PAS evolve beyond its traditional boundaries to embrace a more inclusive vision that resonates with all Malaysians? Balancing its religious history with modern aspirations can unlock new possibilities for the party and the nation.

PAS is an Islamist political party founded in 1951. Known for its conservative Islamic ideology, it has been a force of opposition even before Malaysia's independence in 1957. It was in government for brief periods: 1973-77 and 2020-22. In PAS, *kepipinan ulama* (ulama leadership) refers to a group of religious leaders holding key positions. As key players in shaping the party's ideology and policies, the ulama (Islamic scholars) have been partly responsible for maintaining the party's strong grassroots organisation.

Since the resignation of the party's fourth president Mohd Asri Haji Muda in the 1982 Muktamar (PAS' Annual General Meeting), the leadership of PAS has been passed to the ulama faction. It then re-directed the party's ideology and approach. The movement was led by Yusof Rawa, alongside other young leaders of the ulama cadre, including Nik Aziz Nik Mat, Abdul Hadi Awang and Fadzil Noor. Despite PAS having been founded and led by religious scholars who wanted to distinguish itself from UMNO via its Islamist ideology,<sup>1</sup> the *kepipinan ulama* was further popularised following the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

In September 2024, PAS held its 70th Muktamar in Temerloh (Pahang). Party president Abdul Hadi Awang, in his keynote address, emphasised the continued relevance of Islamic governance under the guidance of the Majlis Syura Ulama in navigating Malaysia's challenging political landscape under the Madani government. In accordance with its tradition, the Muktamar highlights the Ulama Council's role in shaping PAS' policy and ensuring that PAS remains grounded in Islamic principles while expanding its influence in the Malay heartland. Overall, the Muktamar reaffirmed the *de facto* central role of the ulama leadership in guiding the party's direction. However, can the party's leadership of the ulama push it forward to garner support from non-Malays?

Undoubtedly, the ulama leadership in PAS has been a dominant force in Malaysian politics for over 40 years. On the one hand, the party currently collaborates with Malay-based party Bersatu and multiracial ones such as Gerakan under the Perikatan Nasional (PN) banner. On the other hand, PAS, on its own accord, maintains its Islamist identity, even more so after the 14th General Election (GE14).<sup>2</sup> After Pakatan Harapan (PH) won in 2018, PAS, alongside UMNO, adopted Islamist populism in which the supposed threat of civilisational "others", particularly Chinese citizens, and necessitated a united Malay-Muslim front.<sup>3</sup> However, in 2023, during the 69<sup>th</sup> Muktamar, Hadi Awang admitted that one of the party's weaknesses is its difficulty in garnering non-Muslim support.<sup>4</sup> In the 2024 Muktamar, PAS delegates voted to allow non-Muslims to become associate members of the party in its efforts to reform its image as an "extreme" party in order to increase its support base.<sup>5</sup> The bigger elephant in the room is whether the PAS ulama leadership model would limit the success of this innovation.

To be sure, under new political circumstances, it needs to reassess if the current leadership style is ideal. Malaysia is witnessing what is perhaps considered the “Second Islamisation Race”, whereby PAS is challenged by the Anwar Ibrahim unity government’s interpretation of Islam within the Madani framework.<sup>6</sup> Although Madani is introduced as a concept of civilisation (or civil society), its root in the Arabic term “medina” (city) and its early discussion by Muslim thinkers such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Miskawayh suggests it has beginnings within Islamic history. In response to the Anwar Ibrahim administration’s more progressive views on Islam, PAS leadership can consider a new model to increase its relevance among the population.

## THE EVOLUTION OF ULAMA LEADERSHIP IN PAS

Ulama are Islamic scholars who have received religious education. They are traditionally experts in Islamic theology, law (sharia), and jurisprudence (fiqh), playing a crucial role in shaping Muslim politics and influencing social discourse. For the purposes of this paper, however, we investigate the definition of ulama as perceived by PAS’ leadership which subsequently transformed the party into a conservative, oppositional, and sometimes revolutionary organisation.<sup>7</sup> The era of ulama leadership began after the 1982 Muktamar held in the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur. PAS witnessed the third formulation of the party’s ideology, after its experimentation with internationalism and left-wing ideologies during the Burhanuddin Al-Helmy presidency, and the Malay-Muslim ethnonationalism of the Asri years.<sup>8</sup> The ulama era marks the growing complexities of these three strains (ulama, internationalism, nationalism), especially when entering Malaysian politics in the 1980s and 1990s to oppose UMNO, a dominant, conservative Malay-nationalist party.

By Malaysian standards, an ulama can be anyone with a background in Islamic studies, sometimes leading to the phenomenon of “false ulama”.<sup>9</sup> Currently, the President and Deputy President of PAS, Abdul Hadi Awang and Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man, have qualifications in Islamic studies and political science (leadership), and party members consider them to be religious clerics.<sup>10</sup> From the 1990s and until recently, PAS had always chosen an ulama to be First Minister (Menteri Besar) in states it has governed.<sup>11</sup> Eight years after the ulama leadership began in 1982, Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, an ulama who received training in Egypt and India, was appointed Menteri Besar of Kelantan. Hadi Awang, another ulama trained in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, was selected by PAS as Menteri Besar of Terengganu after the party defeated Barisan Nasional (BN) in 1999. However, after PAS took control of the Terengganu state administration in 2018, the custom of designating ulama as Menteri Besar was discontinued. Ahmad Samsuri Mokhtar, an aeronautical engineer and university lecturer, became the party’s choice for the position. Samsuri had been Hadi Awang’s political secretary, thus his nomination might have more to do with his political experience than his education—or lack thereof—even though it seems to go against party practice. Since then, Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor’s rise to power in Kedah and national politics has continued to indicate a departure from the ulama-centric ideology. Known for his populist appeal and shoot-from-the-hip public statements,<sup>12</sup> Sanusi does not have a background in Islamic studies. The party has yet to determine a different leadership model at the national level.<sup>13</sup> The most possible path forward may be ethnonationalist leadership, given PAS’ veer towards right-wing populism through its partnership with Bersatu.

The strength of the ulama leadership lies in its resonance with a significant segment of the Malay populace. This has been proven partly when PAS won in many places inside its largely conservative and rural stronghold in the 15<sup>th</sup> general election (GE15) in 2022.<sup>14</sup> This is due to Islam's central role in Malaysian society and politics and an important factor in enhancing legitimacy and control for the Malay-Muslim population.<sup>15</sup> The popularity of this model underscores the validity of religiously grounded leadership.<sup>16</sup>

A notable downside surfaces in the perception that the ulama leadership model may be ill-suited to the demands of the current political scene. As argued by Kuru,<sup>17</sup> the alliance between the ulama and the state may lead to authoritarianism as the ulama may no longer play its role effectively as a check on the government. As a result, broader aspirations for reform in the government's administration would be harder to materialise. The risk is that PAS could find itself alienated within the national reform struggle, particularly among Malaysians who seek a more progressive and liberal political approach.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This paper is based on qualitative research with a specific focus on expert interviews. This approach has been chosen for its capacity to delve deeply into the experiences, perspectives, and interpretations surrounding the impact and implications of ulama leadership within PAS. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Ahmad Ubaidillah (Head, Gombak PAS Youth Wing) and Afnan Hamimi (National PAS Youth Chief and Member of Parliament for Alor Setar), whose direct involvement with the party provided a unique lens into the motivations and challenges of this model. Additionally, written interviews were conducted with Dr Mohd Zuhdi Marzuki (Former PAS Research Center Director) and Dr Mahfodz Mohamed (Former Head of the Central PAS Ulama Council). All the interviews were conducted in June 2024. These interviewees represent diverse positions in PAS, including the ulama and non-ulama leaders, with Dr Mohd Zuhdi, Afnan, and Dr Mahfodz being the most prominent. The semi-structured nature of the interview guide ensures a balance between flexibility and coverage of essential themes related to ulama leadership.

## **THE FUTURE OF THE ULAMA LEADERSHIP MODEL**

Within PAS, there is a steadfast belief in the importance of ulama leadership. The interviewees present this model as crucial to the maintaining of PAS's core values and to ensuring that its decisions are grounded in Islamic principles. The preference for ulama leadership stems from a commitment to align PAS to the teachings and requirements of the Shariah, or Islamic laws. Dr Mohd Zuhdi Marzuki emphasises the need to defend the ulama leadership model. He points to a period from 2008 to 2015, when he claims that the party's direction risked being hijacked by external influences within the Pakatan Rakyat coalition. During that period, tension was high between PAS and DAP, especially about the implementation of hudud and the establishment of an Islamic state. It was also high within PAS itself between the so-called ulama and professional factions.

Further reinforcing Dr Mohd Zuhdi's perspective is Afnan Hamimi, who asserts that the ulama leadership is irreplaceable. He states, "Ulama leadership cannot be replaced with another model because the highest reference in PAS is Al-Quran, Sunnah, Ijma', and Qiyas."<sup>18</sup> This highlights

the belief that any alternative leadership model could not adequately uphold the party's religious obligations, and preserve the integrity of its decisions.

These views underscore a broader sentiment within PAS that the ulama are uniquely equipped to ensure that the party's actions and policies remain faithful to Islamic teachings. Based on the party's constitution, "Members of the Ulama Council are teachers or/and graduates of any field of Islamic studies from any Higher Education Institution or any person who has mastered Islamic studies who has become a member of PAS."<sup>19</sup> The ulama's understanding of religious texts and principles are supposed to position them as the ideal leaders to navigate complex political landscapes while staying true to PAS' mission.

However, the belief in ulama leadership within PAS is not universally held, and there are interpretations that suggest a more flexible approach. The notion that the ulama leadership is necessary is challenged by those who emphasise the guidance of the Majlis Syura rather than specific leadership roles within PAS. As Ahmad Ubaidillah mentioned, "[I]nstitutionally, ulama leadership means the struggle and movement of PAS guided by the Majlis Syura."<sup>20</sup> This definition highlights that the essence of ulama leadership is not in holding power directly but in providing vital religious and legal oversight. This overview by the Majlis Syura ensures that the decisions and actions of PAS align with Islamic principles, but does not necessitate that an Ulama occupies the presidency or other leadership roles. This view supports a model where the guidance of ulama in legal and religious affairs ensures continuity, regardless of who holds specific titles. This stand had been previously argued by the so-called "Erdogan" camp in PAS led by Mohamad Sabu. But after his faction was defeated in the 2015 party polls, there has been no clear direction on whether the party is ready to accept this interpretation of leadership, and if so to what extent.

Further expanding this idea, Ahmad Ubaidillah noted that, "[W]hether an ulama needs to be a leader or president is flexible and can change."<sup>21</sup> This flexibility allows professionals or other qualified individuals to lead PAS without losing the party's core Islamic principles. Such flexibility might bring fresh perspectives and adaptability to PAS's political strategies while preserving the party's integrity governed by the Majlis Syura. Although Ahmad Ubaidillah may not be as nationally prominent as the other interviewees, he does hold a position in the party's branch and his views should not be dismissed.

He also observed that the tradition of having an ulama as president is not a constitutional requirement. "It is merely a tradition, not a strict rule in the constitution that says only ulama can be president."<sup>22</sup> This assertion highlights the openness within the party's framework for different leadership models that still respect and uphold the guidance function of the ulama, as already championed by the progressive faction before they left PAS and formed Parti Amanah Negara. But according to Dr Mahfodz Mohamed, "As long as there is no proposal to revoke it, the ulama leadership will remain."<sup>23</sup>

The prevailing sentiment among interviewees is that the current ulama leadership model is the most appropriate for PAS. There is also a recognition that any significant change to this model would require a substantial shift in the mindset of PAS supporters. As further clarified by Dr Mahfodz Mohamed, "[T]here have been efforts to replace the ulama leadership model with another policy, such as during the leadership election in 2015... There were contests for

positions from the president downwards, but they all failed in the election. Therefore, the ulama leadership model has remained in place until today.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, as PAS’ long history has shown, the party ebbs and flows according to the political landscape of Malaysia. If enough people within and outside the party demand change, PAS may find it necessary to reconsider its leadership model.

## CONCLUSION

At its core, Islam as a religion anchors itself in the teachings of the Quran and Hadith, which prioritise respect, tolerance, and peace—values that can foster unity and harmony within Malaysia’s multicultural society. Under the guidance of elected representatives committed to inclusivist Islamic values, these principles have the potential to underpin governance that is both compassionate and just. For example, Nik Aziz, the revered spiritual leader of PAS from 1991 until 2015, exemplified a blend of inclusivist ulama leadership. Emphasising Islamic principles, figures like Nik Aziz and Fadzil Noor keenly fostered inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony via cooperation with the DAP,<sup>25</sup> understanding that national unity depends on respect for Malaysia’s multicultural fabric. Their commitment to inclusivity ensured that PAS remained relevant and appealing across diverse communities, thus fostering acceptance of the party by a wider population segment. Preserving religious values while embracing diversity could coexist, paving the way for harmony that benefits both the party and the nation.

From the interviews, it appears that the core principles of ulama leadership are expected to continue guiding PAS. The party’s future will likely involve a continuous balancing between maintaining its religious foundations and adapting to the changing political environment. Understanding this dynamic will be crucial for the future of Malaysia, given PAS’s current position as the single party with the largest number of seats in Parliament. Failing to evolve, the party will stay stagnant with just the support of conservative Malay-Muslims in Malaysia. The by-elections held in 2024 exemplify this, when Perikatan Nasional lost three of the four state by-elections. In Nenggiri and Mahkota, Barisan Nasional even increased its majority by 16.08% and 43.56%, respectively, at the expense of the Perikatan Nasional candidates. Since Perikatan Nasional and Barisan Nasional (specifically UMNO) compete for the same pool of Malay-Muslim voters, growing support for UMNO is not a good sign for PAS. Although these results cannot be generalised, there is a sense that Perikatan Nasional has reached its zenith in terms of support from its traditional base.

Unless PAS decides to make changes swiftly, including in its leadership model, there is little likelihood of it taking over Putrajaya, except with the help of partners within and outside of Perikatan Nasional such as Bersatu, Gerakan, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) and Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS). But for PAS to convince the others to join a government coalition, the party needs to show willingness to compromise—as it did before under Pakatan Rakyat—which might be difficult to achieve with a narrow and populist interpretation of Islamic values. While PAS had worked with these parties to form the federal government from 2020 until 2022, it might be more challenging now that GRS, and especially GPS, have found that they can work effectively with Pakatan Harapan under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim. Therefore, for PAS to envision a future as the main party leading Malaysia, it needs to have an honest review of its strategy to be more attractive to both non-Muslims and Muslims who may not share the view of having an ulama heading the party or the country. This would be in line with

calls by the party to open its membership to non-Muslims. Dissenting voices within PAS must make greater effort to convince the current leadership to accept different views; that is how the party can stay united and avoid another splinter group being formed.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wan Saiful Wan Jan. (2020). *Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS): Unifier of the Ummar?* ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. Pg. 2

<sup>2</sup> Shukri, S. (2023). *In Limbo: Islamist populism and democratic stagnation in Malaysia*. In: Democratic recession, autocratization, and democratic backlash in Southeast Asia. Contestations in Contemporary Southeast Asia book series (CCSA). Springer Nature, Singapore, pp. 93-115.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Rashvinjeet S Bedi. (2023, October 21). 'Seeking more honey': Why Malaysia's Islamist party PAS wants to woo non-Muslim voters. CNA. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-pas-hadi-awang-muslim-malay-anwar-muhyiddin-3863046>

<sup>5</sup> Azril Annuar. (2024, September 16). In symbolic move, Malaysia's Islamist party PAS votes to admit non-Muslims. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/in-symbolic-move-malaysia-s-islamist-party-pas-votes-to-admit-non-muslims>

<sup>6</sup> Mohd Faizal Musa argued that the current iteration of Madani is based on Maqasid al-Shariah within a post-Islamist context. This further strengthens the argument of Madani being the Anwar administration's interpretation of Islamisation. See Mohad Faizal Musa. (2023). The Evolution of Madani: How is 2.0 different from 1.0? [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/TRS18\\_23.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/TRS18_23.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Farish, A.N. (2014). *The Malaysian Islamic Party PAS 1951-2013*. Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> According to IKIM, the false ulama "prefer the path of worldliness, where power, wealth and dominion are the ultimate aim. How could such a person be trusted and relied upon?" <https://www.ikim.gov.my/new-wp/index.php/2015/03/31/who-are-the-real-ulama/>

<sup>10</sup> Abdul Hadi Awang is known for having a bachelor's degree in shariah from Islamic University Madinah and a master's degree in siyasah syar'iyah (Political Science) from Al-Azhar University, while Tuan Ibrahim has bachelor's and master's degrees in leadership from the National University of Malaysia. Former deputy presidents Nasharudin Mat Isa has a background in law whereas Mohamad Sabu studied food technology.

<sup>11</sup> Tayeb, Azmil. (2023). How Far Will PAS Deviate from the Ulama Leadership Model, and Why Does it Matter?. 1-10. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-88-how-far-will-pas-deviate-from-the-ulama-leadership-model-and-why-does-it-matter-by-azmil-tayeb/>

<sup>12</sup> Shukri, S. (2024). Next-Gen Malay Populists: Sanusi Md Nor and Akmal Saleh. In: *Elite Populism and Malay Political Leaders in Malaysia*. Palgrave Studies in Populisms. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6301-6\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6301-6_8)

<sup>13</sup> Tayeb, Azmil. (2023). How Far Will PAS Deviate from the Ulama Leadership Model, and Why Does it Matter?. 1-10. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-88-how-far-will-pas-deviate-from-the-ulama-leadership-model-and-why-does-it-matter-by-azmil-tayeb/>

<sup>14</sup> Other factors that explained PAS' success in 2022 include its effective social media campaign and the Malays losing trust in the long-ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, G. (2010). Legible Pluralism: The Politics of Ethnic and Religious Identification in Malaysia. *Ethnopolitics*, 9, 31 - 52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449050903557401>.



<sup>16</sup> Chai, J. (2023). 2023/85 “Abdul Hadi Awang enhances his power as PAS president and drives the party to the far-right”. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. <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/>

<sup>17</sup> Ahmet T. Kuru. *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison*. Cambridge University Press. 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Personal communications, 13 June 2024

<sup>19</sup> Perlembagaan Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). Pg. 74

<sup>20</sup> Personal communication, 9 June 2024

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication, 5 June 2024

<sup>24</sup> Tensions escalated during the party's muktamar (general assembly) in June 2015, where the conservative faction, bolstered by strong support from grassroots members, secured decisive victories in key party elections. This shift sidelined the progressive leaders who had been advocating for broader coalition-building, particularly with opposition parties that did not share PAS's strict interpretation of Islamic governance. In response to their marginalisation, the progressive leaders, alongside their supporters, exited PAS and formed Amanah in September 2015.

<sup>25</sup> See Liow, J. C. (2011). Islamist Ambitions, Political Change, And the Price of Power: Recent Success and Challenges for The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 22(3), 374–403. At the same time, efforts such as the establishment of the PAS Supporters’ Club and the cooperation with DAP have been questioned for its sincerity or simply as a political strategy to win votes.

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