

**AZMIL** Tayeb  
Universiti Sains Malaysia

## **GREEN WAVE OF CHANGE IN THE EAST COAST: PAS AND ANTI-UMNO BACKLASH IN KELANTAN**

*This article aims to look at the surprisingly positive results of the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS) in Malaysia's recent 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections (GE14) and offers an analysis why the party had managed to defy the expectation of many pundits and polling agencies leading up to the GE14. While it is commonly agreed that most "opposition votes" in the GE14 were anti-UMNO votes, one is still at pains to explain why the "opposition votes" on the east coast of peninsular Malaysia overwhelmingly went to PAS and not its rival parties Amanah and Bersatu, unlike in other parts of the country. This article argues that in order to have a fuller understanding of the electoral "green wave" (referring to PAS's color) that swept through the east coast region of the peninsular Malaysia we need to reach further back in history to trace and discern the root causes of "oppositional politics" that pervades this region, namely Kelantan. Deeply embedded historical injustices lodged within the collective social memory of the people of Kelantan help to define the kind of "oppositional politics" in the state. It can also explain why its people rather choose PAS than its rival parties when the former had almost no chance of taking over the federal government due to its decision to contest independently.*

**Keywords:** 14<sup>th</sup> General Election, PAS, Islamic politics, Kelantan, UMNO

### **Introduction**

After dominating the national political landscape for six decades, the loss of the National Coalition (*Barisan Nasional*, BN) in 14<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE14) came as a colossal surprise for Malaysians, albeit a welcome one for most. Another post-electoral shocker that has received less public attention is the surprisingly strong showing of the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*, PAS), defying all odds stacked against it in the days leading up to the election. Merdeka Centre's poll released on the eve of the election indicated that PAS would only retain two parliamentary seats and at a serious risk of losing Kelantan, the only state government under its control.<sup>1</sup> Rafizi Ramli's polling outfit, Invoke, predicted an even bleaker fate for PAS by boldly announcing that the party would be completely wiped out in the election.<sup>2</sup> Despite the doom and gloom prognostications, PAS managed to win

18 parliamentary seats nationally – a gain of 4 seats – while not just retaining Kelantan but also wresting back Terengganu state government from BN. In other words, instead of being washed away by the proverbial tsunami of change that swept across other states in the peninsula and brought the erstwhile opposition coalition *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) into power, PAS rode its own “green wave of change” on the east coast of peninsular Malaysia.

To understand the strong support for PAS in GE14 from a certain segment of the society we must first look at the nature of “oppositional politics” in PAS strongholds especially Kelantan. “Oppositional politics” here is defined as the choice of political parties presented to voters as a means to express their opposition against the political party in power. The winner-takes-all electoral system in Malaysia ensures that voters are left with only two, often severely lopsided choices of political parties to support. In Kelantan and Terengganu, for instance, it means choosing between the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and PAS. Still, it does not explain why “oppositional politics” in other parts of the country especially in states that fell to PH is much more fluid, where anti-UMNO Malay voters have no qualms in supporting other Malay-Islamic parties such as the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (*Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia*, Bersatu) or the National Trust Party (*Parti Amanah Negara*, Amanah), while in Kelantan and to some extent Terengganu political contestation remains rigidly dichromatic between the UMNO blue and PAS green. In order to better comprehend the nature of “oppositional politics” we must delve into the history of Islamic politics in this part of the country. I will use Kelantan as a specific case study to explain why the support for PAS remains stubbornly resilient in the face of sweeping change seen in other parts of the country, all the while knowing the astronomically long odds of PAS becoming part of the ruling government due to its decision to contest independently.

The article starts with a theoretical discussion on the nature of “oppositional politics” that includes impetuses, catalysts and sustaining factors that give birth to such political dynamic and provide it with a fertile milieu in which it can thrive. Next, the article briefly explains the methodology used in its analysis of “oppositional politics” seen in Kelantan. It is then followed by a historical overview of “oppositional politics” in Kelantan by tracing its root causes to the late colonial era and the electoral politics following Malaysian independence in 1957. Next, the article discusses PAS’s “oppositional politics” in the aftermath of the pivotal 12<sup>th</sup> General Election in 2008 that had unprecedentedly denied BN its customary two-third majority in the parliament, through the 13<sup>th</sup> General Election in 2013, including the exodus of its professional faction to form *Amanah*, and leading up to the recent GE14 on 9 May, 2018. Finally, the article closes with a prospective look at the future of PAS’s “oppositional politics” in light of its better than expected GE14 results.

## The “Green Wave” in the Context of Social Movement Theory

One crucial aspect of “oppositional politics” is translating collective grievances into a viable socio-political movement that is able to represent the aspirations and exasperations of its aggrieved community. Political activists must first frame collective grievances into broader and more resonant claims that are easily comprehended and intimately relatable by the affected community.<sup>3</sup> Framing, according to David Snow and Robert Benford, entails “an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment”.<sup>4</sup> In the context of this article, the “interpretive schemata” that forms the core of “oppositional politics” in Kelantan for decades has been the resiliency of PAS as the indigenous stalwart defending the state’s unique tradition and history against foreign interlopers (read: UMNO) bent on seizing the state for its naked greed and eroding Kelantan’s robust Islamic character.

Framing grievances into an “interpretive schemata” is not a linear, easily translatable process. Political activists who intend on instrumentalizing cultural symbols as a mobilizing tool must be able to align the said symbols with the community’s pre-existing tradition and history, lest public sees the mobilization efforts as alien and inimical to its organic values.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, symbols of political resistance cannot be imported and imposed on the community as they have to make sense to the local folks who are not well versed in the ideology that informs these symbols. A Marxist revolution, for instance, needs to adapt the ideology of class struggle and its attendant political symbols into the local context, so as to make the revolution authentic and home-grown. Antonio Gramsci, a prominent Marxist theorist, stresses on the important role of “organic intellectuals” in translating and localizing ideology in order to mobilize the masses against the ideological hegemony of the ruling elites.<sup>6</sup> With regards to the “oppositional politics” in Kelantan, the deep-reaching bureaucratization of Islamic administration in the early 1900s gave rise to the seeds of communal grievances especially in the rural areas, which later blossomed and fed into the political narrative of PAS in the post-independence years and popularized by “organic intellectuals” in the form of local religious teachers and scholars. This political dynamic will be explained in more detail in subsequent sections.

In social movement theory, one way for a politically disadvantaged group to become an organized movement is through resource mobilization. Resource mobilization model sees social movement in an institutionalized form that requires injection of resources such as organizational support, charismatic leaders, resonating ideology and financial infusion in order to thrive. According to J. Craig Jenkins, it is a form of social movement for institutional change that focuses on “altering elements of social structure and/

or the reward distribution of society, organizing previously unorganized groups against institutional elites, or representing interests of groups excluded from the polity".<sup>7</sup> These characteristics are amply evident in PAS as it represents the struggle of aggrieved Kelantanese against the UMNO-led federal juggernaut. PAS is well known for its grassroots organizational prowess, fierce loyalty of its supporters, widely influential ulama and other religious leaders, a salient ideology and a powerful oppositional narrative, all of which contribute as indispensable resources for its mass mobilization efforts.

In his analysis of PAS's outstanding achievements in the 1999 and 2008 general elections, Joseph Liow argues that by simply explaining the positive results in terms of protest votes against UMNO is not sufficient. Employing the resource mobilization model, he surmises that it is the strategic choices made by PAS to strengthen its organization and widen its public outreach, in particular through caderization of young members, that leads to respectable electoral results for the party.<sup>8</sup> This analysis can partially help to illuminate why protest votes against UMNO in Kelantan and Terengganu in GE14 went to PAS, instead of its rivals *Amanah* and Bersatu. Decades of mobilizing resources and harnessing historical grievances as symbols of political resistance to cultivate and deepen support in its core constituencies have resulted in PAS's entrenched political status on the east coast of the peninsular Malaysia, unassailable by other rival parties.

Strategic choices alone cannot satisfactorily explain why overwhelming majority of people in Kelantan and Terengganu voted for PAS despite knowing full well that the party could never become a major player on the national political stage due to its unfortunate decision to go it alone. In other words, what compels the voters on the east coast not to support PH parties, and instead engage in this exercise in futility? Here the centrality of ideology as the prime driver of political mobilization takes the spotlight. The role of ideology in a movement becomes more acute in a repressive and lopsided political atmosphere when the cost of activism is prohibitively high and the quest for self-preservation becomes the only logic. When people act in contradiction to their perceived self-interests, it is what Carrie Wickham, in her study of the Islamist movement in Egypt, calls "transvaluation of values." In other words, ideology is the reason why individuals reorder their priorities, which places abstract ideals over the need for survival, or in the case of PAS's supporters, choosing loyalty to a party at all cost over the political pragmatism of supporting rival parties for short-term gains.<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned before, localization or indigenization of a political ideology is instrumental in ensuring the viability of a social movement. Doug McAdam, in his study of the black insurgency in the American south in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, stresses the vital role played by indigenous social networks such as black churches as the central hub for social movement, where ideology can be disseminated and plans of action concocted.<sup>10</sup> Indigenous social networks

such as Islamic schools, especially *Sekolah Agama Rakyat* and *pondok*, which are known to be the incubator – ideological- and recruitment-wise – for PAS, along with various mosques and other local Islamic institutions, are instrumental in laying the foundation for inculcating “oppositional” ideas and rekindling of the past as a catalyst for action in the present.<sup>11</sup> Another way of putting it, localization or indigenization of political ideology is inextricably linked with the aggrieved community’s own social memory, through which runs a nexus from past injustices to present day political actions.

Social memory, according to Maurice Halbwachs, draws its materials and inspiration from group memberships. It has the power to engender selective memorizing and forgetting among members of said social groups. The influence of social memory is such that groups can even produce memories in individuals of events that they “never ‘experienced’ in any direct sense”.<sup>12</sup> The values of the past are perceived to be universal and transcendent across time, which provide social memory a modularity that can be exploited by vested interests within a community. The significance of present-day events and happenstances only come to light when they can be explained and justified with the values of the past.<sup>13</sup> In short, social memory entails “[r]ediscovering the past in the present, effecting historical continuity”.<sup>14</sup>

Another approach of the social movement theory, the political process model, also offers a clear explanation as to why and how “oppositional politics” in Kelantan came into existence. In the political process model, McAdam puts forth three sets of factors that are crucial in the creation of a social movement. First is the degree of organizational “readiness” within the minority community; second is the level of “insurgent consciousness” within the movement’s mass base; and third is “the structure of political opportunity”.<sup>15</sup> While the resource mobilization approach looks at social movement in the context of political economy and organizational support, the political process model trains its analytical lens on the psychological impetuses that give rise to mass mobilization of an aggrieved community, namely the cognitive development that allows for collective needs to transcend individual’s self-interests and emboldens the aggrieved community to organize and take concrete actions.

In regards to the degree of organizational “readiness,” the presence of an “indigenous” infrastructure is a necessary condition in order to serve as a social support system and communications network for members of the aggrieved population. As previously mentioned, the network of Islamic schools, religious studies (*pengajian*) and religious sermons at the mosques provide avenues for individuals to connect with each other, share their grievances and immerse in ideological training. It is also through this “indigenous” infrastructure PAS draw their leaders, another important element of the “political process” model. An “oppositional politics” that finds strong resonance in its local community, therefore, possesses an active and extensive “indigenous network” that is able to connect its aggrieved members, inculcate

them with the movement's values, and rally them against a common enemy.

The second crucial factor is the level of "insurgent consciousness" within the community; essentially, it is the presence of radically-transformed awareness among the people that allows for the movement to take off, or what McAdam terms as "cognitive liberation".<sup>16</sup> In other words, a social movement can only take place if there is a critical mass of collective consciousness among the aggrieved community to rebel against its oppressors. It is a psychological transformation on a societal scale that converts members of an aggrieved community from timidly acquiescing to the injustices visited upon them to mustering enough courage not to take the slights lying down, so to speak. In Kelantan, the "insurgent consciousness" found refuge in PAS when the party was established in 1951. PAS provides a comforting political structure through which the hopes and frustrations of an aggrieved community can be channeled as a means to confront the depraved UMNO elites, safe enough for Kelantanese to break out of their shell and cognitively liberate themselves.

The third important ingredient in the formation of a social movement is the structure of political opportunity. McAdam defines the change in the structure of political opportunity as "*any* event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured occasions a shift in political opportunities".<sup>17</sup> The shift in political opportunity in Kelantan came when the first general election was held in 1955. The general election provided an outlet for grievances against the ruling elites that had been simmering for many years to erupt, through which PAS emerged as the designated ideological vehicle. Nonetheless, it was only in the following general election in 1959 that PAS managed to gain control of the state government in Kelantan, which it held continuously until 1978 and again from 1990 until present.

Social movement theory provides the analytical tool with which we can better comprehend the electoral dynamics that took place on the east coast of peninsular Malaysia in the GE14. Specifically, it affords us a way to probe into the collective psyche of a voting bloc that seems to defy the electoral trend seen elsewhere in the country. The root causes for this voting behavior, as this article argues, can be traced to the state's past, which will be discussed in greater length in following sections. "The past, as the author William Faulkner writes in *Requiem for a Nun*, is never dead. It's not even past." It is imperative then for us not to outright discount the historical factors that inspire and imbue the political actions of today, especially when age-old wrongdoings and slights are still prevalent and remain unaddressed. "Injustices, says William Gamson, focuses on righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul".<sup>18</sup> In the historical background section we shall see how the righteous anger that fuels "oppositional politics" in Kelantan is forged in the fiery crucible of the state's history.

This article employs qualitative research methods in its analysis of the better-than-expected support for PAS during the Malaysian 14<sup>th</sup> general elections. The article's analysis is mainly based on archival and library research, newspaper articles and interviews, which were part of the author's doctoral thesis' research from 2012 to 2016. The author also includes an interview with a PAS activist in Kelantan in the aftermath of the election to shed more light on the results. The primary focus of this article is to trace the root causes of the anti-UMNO votes that went overwhelmingly to PAS in the state of Kelantan, which therefore explains its heavy emphasis on historical details.

## History of “Oppositional Politics” in Kelantan

Article 3 of the Malaysian constitution, which provides each state the full authority to manage Islamic affairs within its borders, allows for the creation of the State Islamic Council (*Majlis Agama Islam Negeri*). In Kelantan, the state's authority to manage its Islamic affairs rests with the *Majlis Agama Islam Dan Adat Istiadat Melayu Kelantan (MAIK)*, which was established in 1915. MAIK will be the lens through which we start our analysis on the “oppositional politics” in Kelantan.

“Oppositional politics” in Kelantan traces its roots to late colonial period during the British “forward movement” efforts to deepen its control over the Malayan society. Establishing a comprehensive network of colonial bureaucracy was one of the efforts, of which MAIK was part. Local chieftains (*penggawa* or *penghulu*) who used to reign unimpeded now found their traditional fiefdoms being replaced by the generic sounding “districts” and their own influence being subsumed by “district officers,” typically non-local agents of the colonial administration. In short, modern bureaucratic form of government, which was comprehensively uniform and far reaching, was rapidly replacing the traditional governing structure, thus igniting a political tension that defines “oppositional politics” in Kelantan.

Before the British intervention, highly autonomous imams were in charge of administering Islamic affairs at the local level. Imams held complete authority over their parishes (*mukim*), which, in addition to usual religious responsibilities, also included conflict mediation, land surveying, and poll-tax collection. The colonial bureaucracy began to replace the imams with its own officers to take over the secular tasks, relegating the authority of the imams to merely the religious sphere. Even in their sacral duties, the imams were no longer independent; rapid administrative expansion by MAIK had absorbed the imams into its fold. MAIK forced the previously independent imams to formally register with the council, closely supervised their activities, and more importantly, obligated them to surrender three-fifth of wealth tax (*zakat*) and seven-eighth of head tax (*fitrah*) collected in their parishes, which hitherto had been their only funding sources. Adding insult to injury, this new submissive

role of the imams came largely unpaid by MAIK.<sup>19</sup> The bureaucratic over-reaching by MAIK led to widespread resentment among the predominantly rural imams, which, in turn, set the course for an “oppositional politics” that has persisted until the present day by driving the rural religious functionaries into the arms of the Islamic party PAS.

After the Malaysian independence in 1957, the “oppositional politics” in Kelantan can be seen in the context of the state’s long fraught relationship with the UMNO-led federal government in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya.<sup>20</sup> This political tension can be traced back to the first post-independence election in 1959 when PAS captured the state government despite an overwhelming nationwide victory by the UMNO-led National Alliance. The PAS victory was a testament to its deep support within the overwhelmingly rural population of Kelantan. PAS’s core constituency in Kelantan consisted of local religious functionaries such as ulama *pondok*, imam, and *lebai*; UMNO, a political vehicle for the Malay elites, was not able to reach beyond the backing of those who had benefited handsomely from the pre-independence status quo, namely the aristocrats, English-educated civil servants, and wealthy landowners.<sup>21</sup> The “oppositional politics,” in essence, can be cast in the form of class and geographic (urban-rural) differences.

Prior to the 1959 election, UMNO had tried to penetrate into the rural heartlands where PAS drew its political succor by enlisting the help of MAIK. MAIK, with its deep-reaching bureaucracy and helmed by local Malay elites who were also UMNO partisans, used its formal authority to restrict the influence of PAS by using a carrot-and-stick approach. On the one hand, MAIK publicly claimed that only UMNO could bring development to the rural areas by building new stone-and-cement- concrete mosques and madrasah (Islamic schools) while attempting to persuade people that UMNO was as Islamic as PAS; on the other hand, since the early 1960s, *Majlis Agama* also prohibited its imams from talking about politics during Friday sermons (*khutbah Jumaat*) since most of them were PAS supporters. MAIK, in the words of Clive Kessler, was “an explicit instrument of the old elite’s bid, back in Kuala Lumpur and in UMNO garb, to reassert its control over the state”.<sup>22</sup>

Corollary to MAIK, one important aspect of the “oppositional politics” in Kelantan is the role of rural Islamic schools, namely *Sekolah Agama Rakyat* (SAR), as the bastion of PAS’s defiance against the federal government. Many of the religious functionaries who form the core support for PAS such as *imam*, *ustaz*, *ustazah* and *lebai* either are products of or work at these schools. It is of no wonder that these schools have unflinchingly provided the grassroots support for PAS in Kelantan even during its time in the political wilderness (1978-1990). Ultimately, it was the ulama leadership, spearheaded by the late Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, that brought PAS back to power again in Kelantan in 1990 after purging the Malay nationalist faction within the party.



SAR especially came into notoriety in the early 2000 when the federal government accused the schools of producing and harboring terrorists. The federal government charged some SAR with being hotbeds of Islamic radicalism and subversive activities, and thus suspended their funding. The Prime Minister at the time, Mahathir Mohamad, proclaimed, “SAR teachers have deviated from the real purpose of education and taught students to hate the government and other Muslims”.<sup>23</sup>In March 2003 the then Education Minister Musa Mohamad announced in the Parliament that government funding for SAR nationwide, which at the time numbered 268 schools with 74,453 students and 4,429 teachers, would be diverted to national Islamic schools due to their dismal academic performance and anti-government activities, which resulted in the transfer of almost 15,000 SAR students and 2,000 teachers to other schools.<sup>24</sup>

By suspending the funding for SAR, the federal government risked being perceived as hostile to Islamic interests, which it had been trying to avoid since the late 1970s at the onset of Islamic resurgence wave in Malaysia. As a compromise, the federal government decided to resume funding for SAR in 2004 in return for SAR’s registration with the Ministry of Education.<sup>25</sup>Nevertheless, the damage was done since by targeting SAR, the federal government had further antagonized PAS by deepening the resolve of its supporters and strengthening its political narrative of a victim that suffered unjustly at the cruel hands of the infidel-loving UMNO.

PAS’s rule in Kelantan has been unbroken since 1990 while in Terengganu, PAS had only managed to gain control of the state government in 1999 on the back of a massive Malay backlash against the incarceration of Anwar Ibrahim before losing it again to UMNO after one term in 2004. The durability of PAS government in Kelantan is a testament to the strength of its ideology that is deeply rooted in the state’s history as I have illustrated above. One SAR principal, who is a staunch PAS supporter, neatly epitomizes the steely ideological tenacity of a political David against the UMNO Goliath. When his school became one of the aforementioned twenty SAR absorbed into the Ministry of Education and converted into Government Assisted Religious Schools (*Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan*, SABK), he, along with eleven other SAR principals, decided not to become a federal employee and instead to remain employed with *Yayasan Islam Kelantan*, thus forgoing higher pay and better career prospects. He called it his own “jihad fisabilillah” (religious struggle).<sup>26</sup>It was “oppositional politics” writ small but nonetheless still manifested the sacrificial aspect of standing firmly by one’s conviction regardless of the outcome, which would be made clearer by the GE14 results.

The woeful shape of Kelantan’s economy also contributes to its political underdog narrative, which serves as a fodder for “oppositional politics” in the state. According to the 2015 national statistics, Kelantan is one of the poorest states in Malaysia; its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of RM12,075,

compared to the national average of RM37,104, necessitates a heavy reliance on resource allocation from the federal government.<sup>27</sup> The tussle between Kelantan and the federal government concerning the royalty payment of oil found on its coast further augments the narrative of “oppositional politics” in the state as it pins the blame on the federal government for depriving Kelantan of the oil royalty payment and thus arresting its economic development.<sup>28</sup> Simply put, being at a politically and economically disadvantaged position would only galvanize the people’s backing for PAS in Kelantan while turning UMNO into a vindictive villain who would rather see the state suffers for its recalcitrance.

### “Oppositional Politics” in the post-GE12 era (2008–2018)

The 2008 general elections marked a watershed moment in the history of Malaysian politics as it was the first time the opposition managed to deny the BN a two-third majority in the parliament. In the context of “oppositional politics,” PAS’s oft-fraught relationship with UMNO can be generally divided into two phases during this period: before and after the death of PAS’s former *mursyidul am* (spiritual leader), Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat on 12 February 2015. Between 2008 and 2015 PAS had emerged as a national political force, buoyed by vigorous support from non-Muslims and urban-based Muslims. Just four years earlier in the 2004 general elections, PAS posted its worst result by only winning seven parliamentary seats. Surprisingly, PAS more than tripled its haul in the 2008 general elections by gaining 23 parliamentary seats. In 2013, its electoral fortune took a slight hit as it managed to win 21 parliamentary seats, which also saw the defeats of its top leaders such as Mohamad Sabu, Dzulkefly Ahmad, and Salahuddin Ayub. Nevertheless, PAS during this time was no longer a provincial hardline Islamic party strictly confined to the east coast and northern region of the peninsular Malaysia. It had garnered strong backing from many non-Muslims across the country, so much so that it established *Dewan Himpunan Penyokong PAS* (DHPP) in 2010 as a way to consolidate and empower the party’s non-Muslim supporters.<sup>29</sup> This period indeed signified the party’s heyday as its slogan “PAS for all” became ubiquitous in national politics.

Merely four months after the passing away of Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who had been the moderating force within PAS and the party’s proverbial bridge with other component parties in Pakatan Rakyat (predecessor of PH) especially the staunchly secular Democratic Action Party (DAP), PAS decided to embark on a radical transformation of the party’s leadership. During the party’s 61<sup>st</sup> Annual Congress (*Muktamar Tahunan*) in June 2015, PAS’s party election saw a mass purge of leaders known collectively as the “professional” faction. The tensions between the “professional” and the “ulama” factions had been brewing for many years but reached a whole new magnitude of animosity

after the death of Nik Aziz, who despite his ulama status was an unabashed backer of the “professional” faction, namely in its outreach to non-Muslims and non-traditional supporters of PAS.<sup>30</sup> Many leaders and members of PAS were uneasy of the party’s newfound national prominence, which they believed came at the expense of sacrificing its Islamic *raison d’être*.

Despite the party’s forceful showing in the 2008 general elections, largely credited to the support of non-Muslims, PAS was still unsure of its political orientation. Two by-elections in PAS’s strongholds of Permatang Pasir and Manek Urai held in 2009 exposed the deep divisions within the party as to where it should go, whether it continued to become more inclusive or retreat back to being Malay-Islamic-centric to the point of even cooperating with UMNO. In the mixed district of Permatang Pasir PAS retained the seat with a strong 4,551 majority votes while in the 99 percent Malay district of Manek Urai in Kelantan PAS only managed to win by a razor-thin margin of 65 majority votes, significantly down from 1,352 votes just a year earlier. According to some analysts the two results illustrated the strong appeal of PAS among non-Muslims as seen in Permatang Pasir and a categorical rejection of the party’s more inclusive stance as shown by the voters of Manek Urai.<sup>31</sup> These opposing dynamics finally came to a head during the 61<sup>st</sup> *Muktamar Tahunan* and swung the party back to being Malay-Islamic-centric, which it has remained until today. A month after the 61<sup>st</sup> *Muktamar Tahunan* concluded, PAS Ulama Council (*Majlis Syura Ulama*) made the decision to cease official partnership with DAP, which effectively broke up the *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR) coalition.<sup>32</sup>

The ousted leaders of PAS’s “professional” faction left the party and started a new Islamic party called the National Trust Party (*Parti Amanah Negara, Amanah*) three months later on 16 September 2015. Malaysia now has two political parties with Islamic ideology at their cores and both claim to oppose UMNO, which brings up the question: what kind of competitive dynamics we can hope to see between these two parties? While both parties share a common basis in Islamic ideology, they cannot be any more apart when it comes to constituencies, grassroots support, and electoral machinery. As a newly established party, *Amanah* faced an uphill task in trying to gain the trust of Muslim voters, who hitherto were only familiar with mainly two choices, PAS and UMNO, which had decades of cultivating trust, grassroots support and electoral machineries in Malay-majority constituencies across the country. Two by-elections in Kuala Kangsar and Sungai Besar in June 2016 served as a gauge on how popular the three parties in these Malay-majority constituencies and a first major electoral test for *Amanah*. In Kuala Kangsar, the UMNO candidate won handily with PAS and *Amanah* came second and third, respectively. Meanwhile, in Sungai Besar, UMNO candidate also won easily but here *Amanah* managed to beat PAS to a second place by about 700 votes. The analysis of the results indicated that majority of Malay voters in these

two areas voted overwhelmingly for UMNO and PAS, while most non-Malay voters supported *Amanah*.<sup>33</sup> Succinctly put, *Amanah* still has some ways to go to gain the trust of Malay voters especially if it wants to compete with PAS on the east coast and northern peninsular Malaysia. The results of GE14 further exposed *Amanah*'s lack of socio-cultural capital and Islamic "credibility" as it failed miserably against PAS in the east coast, especially Kelantan, where the local politics has always been colored and defined by Islamic credence and deep-rooted historical grievances.

Thus, the period between 2008 and 2018 saw two types of "oppositional politics" practiced by PAS in its struggle against UMNO: inclusive and exclusive. Up to 2015 PAS's opposition against UMNO was uneasily enconced within the official coalition of PR, which was multi-religious and multi-ethnic. Its partnership with other component parties in PR compelled PAS to modulate its ideology in order to find common values and electoral strategies; in other words, being part of PR made PAS more inclusive and attractive to non-Malays, as clearly shown by the results of 2008 and 2013 general elections. The party had emerged from rural Malay heartlands to become a major political player on the national stage. Nevertheless, the pendulum swung radically to the opposite end after mid-2015 when PAS decided to break its pact with PR and venture off on its own, primarily driven by the focus to protect Malay and Islamic supremacy in Malaysia. The party shed its inclusive pretensions and started to engage coyly with UMNO. Chumminess with UMNO has made its "oppositional politics" more complicated as PAS tried to be both an opposition and an ally. Regardless of its existential crisis post-2015, PAS still benefitted greatly from the anti-UMNO votes in Kelantan and Terengganu during the 2018 general elections as its supporters perceived *Amanah* and Bersatu as equally unpalatable choices. One PAS activist in Kelantan remarked, "The Kelantanese rejection of UMNO cannot be interpreted as a vote for *Pakatan Harapan*. This is because the agenda carried by *Pakatan Harapan* is seen to be incompatible with Islamic values of Kelantanese".<sup>34</sup> In short, majority of people in Kelantan would rather choose a party that they believe to be more Islamically credible and has proven its political worth, that is PAS.

### **"Oppositional Politics" in post-GE14 Kelantan**

With an understanding of the history of "oppositional politics" in Kelantan, it begins to make sense why the Malay voters on the east coast of the peninsular overwhelmingly chose to express their animosity against the UMNO-led federal government by casting their votes for PAS, which had the snowball's chance in hell to take over Putrajaya, instead of supporting the more politically realistic and pragmatic PH. In the parliamentary contest in Kelantan, PAS won 9 seats while UMNO won 5. In Terengganu, PAS won 6 seats while UMNO won 2. Ditto for control of governments in these two states, which are heavily

dominated by PAS. Kelantan and Terengganu are the only two states where PH had failed to win even a single parliamentary or state seat.<sup>35</sup>

To illustrate the political impotency of non-PAS opposition we can simply look at the crushing defeat suffered by Ustaz Nik Omar, the son of the much revered Tuan Guru Nik Aziz, in the Chempaka state seat in Kelantan, who contested as an *Amanah* candidate under the PKR banner. The rout was so complete that he even lost his deposit. Another example is the failure of *Semangat 46*, an UMNO splinter party, to gain traction in Kelantan. Led by its native son, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who was ousted from UMNO after a much disputed party president election, *Semangat 46* joined the PAS state government in Kelantan in 1990 but was not successful in gaining popular support. The party soon disbanded in 1996 and its members either rejoin UMNO, which was what Tengku Razaleigh did, or became members of PAS.

Kelantan's long-standing grievances against the UMNO-led federal government manifested in strong support for PAS in the GE14. One PAS activist in Kelantan explained the grievances behind the deep-seated antipathy against UMNO among the state's populace:

It was as if the actions of Kelantanese to choose PAS as the state government were punished by the federal government when many their rights and facilities were denied. Allocation for development was blocked and instead channeled through the Federal Development Agency. Petroleum royalty denied. Petroleum and natural gas were not piped through Kelantan. The roads did not get upgraded. The airport did not get upgraded. Civil servants who did not support UMNO would be transferred to far-flung places and many other cruelty and injustices done to the people of Kelantan.<sup>36</sup> [translation mine]

In short, Kelantan has not experienced a political dynamic beyond the binary politics of PAS versus UMNO in the past six decades, a trend that has persisted until today and made the state an anomaly in the GE14.<sup>37</sup> It begs the question then as to what we can expect from PAS as we venture into this new epoch of Malaysian politics. Presently PAS is firmly entrenched in Kelantan and Terengganu, and thus relegating its status to merely a regional party that is largely insignificant on the national stage. Its pre-GE14 aspiration to become a kingmaker has come to naught. PAS is currently so ideologically homogenous and unbendingly rigid it is simply impossible to see the party expanding its support beyond its traditional bases of power. Post-GE14 political landscape presents two obvious ways forward for PAS: first option is to remain "independent" and provincial while hoping to extend its political tentacles by capturing the state government in Kedah in the next general election; and the second option is to link up with UMNO to pursue a radical Malay-Islamic supremacist agenda, which is likelier of the two options. The positive GE14

results for PAS mean there is less incentive and pressure for the party to change – unlike UMNO – in order to adapt to the new political reality, lest it angers its core supporters.

PAS's Ahab-like obsession with the implementation of *hudud* law will also compel the party into signing a Faustian deal with UMNO, all in the name of defending the superiority of Malay and Islamic rights in Malaysia. The recently concluded UMNO election fails to shake up the party but instead results in a sharp veer to the right and a deeper retreat into its ethno-religious shell. It does not take an oracle to foresee that one aspect of "oppositional politics" in Malaysia in the coming years will center on a highly toxic concoction of ethno-religious discourse stirred up by the PAS-UMNO unholy alliance that serves to widen the chasm between Muslims and non-Muslims. During the recently concluded Sungai Kandis by-election in Selangor, in which PH managed to retain the seat, PAS leaders had exhorted its members to vote for the UMNO candidate as a display of solidarity against the perceived PH onslaught on the supremacy of Malay and Islam's status in the post-GE14 era.<sup>38</sup>

Simply put, religious fervor that borders on fanatical, which animates the political struggle of PAS in its strongholds, is simply unmatched in other parts of the country or other political parties for that matter. PAS members, for instance, must swear a pledge of allegiance called *bai'ah* as a sign of their fealty to the party, so much so that its members would have to divorce their spouses with *talak tiga* (irrevocable) if they decide to leave the party.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the current president of PAS, Haji Hadi Awang, publicly proclaimed in his infamous 1981 speech familiarly known as *Amanat Hadi* that UMNO was a colonial stooge that was hell-bent on preserving the colonial constitution and un-Islamic laws, which made the party fit to be opposed. *Amanat Hadi* was essentially an ultimatum that exhorted Muslims to carry out their religious duty to support PAS and its political jihad or risk of being labelled as infidels for supporting other political parties. Thus, a Manichean view of combatting evil (UMNO) by uncompromisingly enjoining good (PAS) has come to characterize the "oppositional politics" seen in Kelantan.

Mathematically, a combined force between PAS and UMNO will not be enough to capture the federal government on its own. Between the two parties, there are only 72 parliamentary seats, far short of the 112 needed to form the federal government. A ratcheted up discourse on Malay-Islamic superiority will certainly not endear PAS and UMNO to other parties, and not to add, non-Muslims and moderate Malay voters. So what is the point then for PAS and UMNO to go down the path of ethno-religious extremism and engage in an irresponsibly divisive politics when the said strategy will only alienate a sizeable segment of the voting public? Besides acting as a possible means to fire up their respective bases, it is difficult to see how this strategy will improve the electoral chance of PAS and UMNO in the next general election.<sup>40</sup> Their only hope is enough remorseful Malay voters who supported PH in the

last general election but now wracked with regrets and frustrations with slow progress of reforms will ultimately return to the fold.

## Conclusion

This article strives to illustrate that the nature of “oppositional politics” seen in Kelantan can be traced to the state’s colonial history and not simply a contemporary phenomenon. By looking at the history of rural protests against elite domination in the state, which later gave birth to the long-time political rivalry between PAS and UMNO when the federal government introduced electoral competition, we can see more clearly the deep-rootedness of support for PAS among the Kelantanese and why other Malay-Muslim parties such as Semangat 46, Amanah and Bersatu face an almost insurmountable odd to siphon votes away from PAS and to a lesser extent, UMNO. In short, anti-UMNO votes in Kelantan find their manifestation in a strong turnout for PAS and not for other contending parties, which was clearly evident in the 14<sup>th</sup> general elections.

## Endnotes

1. “Merdeka Centre’s final poll: BN 100, Harapan 83, 37 too close to call”. *Malaysiakini*, 8 May 2018, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/423763> [2 July 2018].
2. “Invoke predicts slim win for Harapan, wipeout for PAS”. *Malaysiakini*, 7 May, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/423535> [2 July 2018].
3. Snow & Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization”, 1988.
4. Quoted in Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 1998, p.110.
5. Ibid. p. 110
6. Gottlieb, *An Anthology of Western Marxism: From Lukács and Gramsci to Socialist-Feminism*, 1989, pp. 113-119.
7. Jenkins, “Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements”. 1983, p. 529.
8. Liow, “Creating Cadres: Mobilization, Activism and the Youth Wing of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS”, 2011.
9. Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt*. 2002, pp.165-175.
10. McAdam, *Black Insurgency: 1930-1970*. 1982, p. 32.
11. Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of the United Malays National Organisation and Party Islam*. 1980, p. 52.
12. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures”. 1999, p. 335.

13. Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations", 1952.
14. Connerton, *How Society Remembers*. p. 37, 1989.
15. McAdam, *Black Insurgency: 1930-1970*. 1982, pp. 36-59.
16. Ibid. p. 8
17. Ibid. 41.
18. Quoted in Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. 1998, p. 111.
19. Kessler, *Islam and Politics in a Malay State: Kelantan, 1838-1969, 1978*, .pp. 195-207.
20. Shafruddin. 1987. *The Federal Factor in the Government and Politics of Peninsular Malaysia* ; Mohamad Agus Yusoff, 2006. *Malaysian Federalism: Conflict or Consensus* ; Loh. 2010. "Restructuring Federal-State Relations in Malaysia: From Centralised to Cooperative Federalism?"
21. Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of the United Malays National Organisation and Party Islam*, 1980, pp. 51-53.
22. Kessler, *Islam and Politics in a Malay State: Kelantan, 1838-1969, 1978*, pp. 293-297.
23. Arfa'eza A Aziz, "SAR advocates not swayed", 2003.
24. See "Jalan terbaik bagi SAR", *Utusan Malaysia*. 24 November 2003. It is not stated how many SAR in Kelantan were affected by the suspension of federal grant but in 2008 *Yayasan Islam Kelantan*, which was controlled by the state government, agreed to a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Education to convert 20 SAR in Kelantan into Government Assisted Islamic Schools (*Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan*, SABK) with five more waiting for approval, effectively ceding authority over these schools to the federal government. See Azmil. 2018. *Islamic Education in Indonesia and Malaysia*.
25. Azizi Umar. et al., "The History of the Institutionalization of People's Religious Schools in Malaysian National Education Policy", 2012, pp. 1047-1048).
26. Interview with Tajudin Mahmood, Principal of SABK al-Fitrah, Tanah Merah, Kelantan, 31 July 2013.
27. Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015; Zulaikha Zulkifli. 2016, "Ku Li: Kelantan needs financial help from Putrajaya."
28. Zailanni Amit, "Impak Isu Royalti Minyak Kelantan Terhadap Hubungan Kerajaan Pusat-Negeri". 2017, pp. 347-351.
29. Non-Muslims support for PAS came in prominence in 2004 when *Kelab Penyokong PAS (Cina)* was established. *Kelab Penyokong PAS (India)* followed suit in 2005. DHPP combined these ethnic-based supporters' clubs into one and upgraded its status into a "council" (*dewan*).



30. In 1999 Nik Aziz made a statement in PAS's newspaper *Harakah* that he was willing to accept a non-Muslim as the Prime Minister of Malaysia (lihat "Kenyataan lucu – Fadzil – Kesediaan Nik Aziz terima pemimpin bukan Islam DAP jadi PM", *Utusan Online*, 8 November 1999, [http://ww1.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=1999&dt=1109&pub=utusan\\_malaysia&sec=Muka\\_Hadapan&pg=fp\\_01.htm](http://ww1.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=1999&dt=1109&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=Muka_Hadapan&pg=fp_01.htm) [8 August 2018]). Three years later he tweaked his statement by saying that only a Muslim non-Malay can become the Prime Minister. See "Bukan Melayu boleh jadi PM asalkan Islam, kata Nik Aziz", <http://www.sinarharian.com.my/nasional/bukan-melayu-boleh-jadi-pm-asalkan-islam-kata-nik-aziz-1.51255> [5 July 2018].
31. Liow & Chan ., "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Reform, Reticence, and Realignments of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party", 2014, pp. 98-99.
32. Hairulazim Mahmud, "PAS batal tahaluf siyasi dengan DAP", 2015. "Rasmi: BN menang besar di Sg Besar, Kuala Kangsar". *Malaysiakini*. 18 Jun, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/345791> [9 August 2018].
33. Personal communication with an unnamed PAS activist in Kelantan, 6 August 2018.
34. Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia. 2018, PRU-14
35. Ibid.
36. In the general elections of 1990 and 1995, *Semangat 46* only managed to muster roughly 14 percent and 12 percent of votes in Terengganu, respectively, barely making a dent in the state's binary politics.
37. "Undi demi Islam, Melayu, PAS nasihat ahli di Sg Kandis". *Free Malaysia Today*. 22 July 2018, <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/bahasa/2018/07/22/undi-demi-islam-melayu-pas-nasihat-ahli-di-sg-kandis/> [10 August 2018].
38. Muhammad Shamsul Abdul Ghani, 2018, "10 fakta apa itu sumpah bai'ah Pas"; Nazura Ngah, 2018, "Pas muktamad bai'ah Talak 3 bulan ini".
39. The result of the Sungai Kandis by-election, the first election held post-GE14, lays bare the deep schism within PAS's membership on the issue of collaborating with UMNO. Most PAS members decided against voting for the UMNO candidate, Lokman Noor Adam, despite the strong urging of the party leadership, which then led to an easy victory of the PH candidate, Mohd Zawawi Abdul Mughni. See Anne Muhammad, 2018. "PAS members unwilling to vote".

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## Biography Note

Azmil Bin Tayeb (azmil.tayeb@gmail.com) is currently a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. He has done extensive research on Islamic politics and social movements, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. His book *Islamic Education in Indonesia and Malaysia: Shaping Minds, Saving Soul* was recently published by Routledge.