The History of Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (1951-1957)

Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) is Malaysia's leading Islamic movement currently led by Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang. As a political party, PAS is the arch-rival of the ruling Malay nationalist party-UMNO. Although registered as a political entity, this does not prevent PAS from operating like any other global Islamic movements which put great emphasis on educating the masses about Islam and correct their misunderstanding of the faith. Tarbiyah (Islamic self-development) and Da'wah (disseminating Islamic ideas to the masses) are two primary focus of the party implemented within PAS' own unique approach of 'da'wah siyasiah' which could be explained as promoting better understanding and appreciation of Islam through political mobilisations and proactive civil politics activities.

Historically, the rise of reformist understanding of Islam as a complete system of life could be traced as far back as to the era of 'tajdid' (renewal) and 'islah' (reformation) in the Malay Peninsular circa early 1900s. This intellectual movement was pioneered by Middle-Eastern educated scholars including Shaykh Tahir Jalaluddin and Hj Abbas Mohd Taha who were heavily influenced by ideas brought by Shaykh Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and Shaykh Rashid Ridha of Egypt. These Malay Muslim reformists have played pivotal role in sparking off Intellectual Revolution amongst the Malays to fight for their independence from the colonials and develop themselves especially in the field of education and economy. They managed to established a handful of influential newspapers including Al-Imam (1906), Idaran Zaman (1925) and Al-Ikhwan (1926) to disseminate these progressive ideas of 'tajdid' and 'islah'.

The first Malay political-oriented organisation was Kesatuan Melayu Muda, KMM (Young Malays Union) under the leadership of Ibrahim Yakob. It was established in May 1937. KMM's main focus was independence of the Malay Peninsular from the British. Unfortunately, KMM could not sustain longer since the union was later banned by the Japanese during their rule in the Malay States (1941-1945).

After the Second World War, a new Malay political party was created in 1945. It was named Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya, PKMM (Malayan Malay Nationalist Party), at first led by Mokhtaruddin Lasso and later, by Dr Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, a religious homeopathic doctor who spoke fluently both Arabic and English (Dr Burhanuddin would later in his political life, lead PAS). PKMM shared the same vision as KMM that was, full independence from the British. In fact, PKMM was very much anti-British.

PKMM was very effective in gaining Malay grass-root supports. It managed to establish various wings affiliated to the party. They were Angkatan Pemuda Insaf, API (Enlightened Youth Front), Angkatan Wanita Sedar, AWAS (Enlightened Women Front), Barisan Tani Se-Malaya, BATAS (Pan Malayan Farmers' Front) and Majlis Agama Tertiinggi Se-Malaya, MATA (Pan Malayan Religious Council). MATA was PKMM's religious wing and was the pre-cursor of Hizbul-Muslimin (established on 14th of March 1948). Hizbul-Muslimin was Malaysia's first Islamic party led by Ustaz Abu Bakar Al-Baqir with the objective to free Malaya from the British rule and establish an Islamic State. However, Hizbul-Muslimin was later banned by the British in August 1948 and its leaders were arrested under Emergency Regulations along with other so-called Malay radical groups (read: anti-British groups) including PKMM.

Although, Hizbul-Muslimin was banned, strong supports from the masses and local Muslim scholars remained intact. The influence of Hizbul-Muslimin infiltrated UMNO's religious bureau then, led by Ustaz Ahmad Fuad Hassan. During the Third Muslim Scholars (Ulama') Conference held on the 15th of August 1951 at UMNO Club Building, Butterworth, Persatuan Ulama' Se-Malaya (Pan Malayan Muslim Scholars Association) came into existence. The pro-tem committee for this society included:

1. Ustaz Haji Ahmad Fuad Hassan - Chairman
2. Ustaz Haji Ahmad Malik - Secretary
3. Tuan Haji Ahmad Badawi Abdullah (father of the current Malaysian premier)
4. Tuan Haji Ahmad Ghazali Abdullah
5. Tuan Haji Ahmad Tuan Hussein
6. Tuan Haji Mansor J.P
7. 2-3 scholars form Selangor and Negeri Sembilan

This association was later changed to Persatuan Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) during its next conference held on the 24th of November of the same year (and this acronym is retained until present day) with Ustaz Ahmad Fuad Hassan as its first president. The conference also decided that PAS has to become
an independent organisation with no affiliation with any other political groups of the day. At that time, PAS was joined by various Islamic based organisations nationwide. They were:
1. Persatuan Guru-guru Agama (Islamic Teachers Association) from Perlis.
2. Persatuan Ulama Kedah (Kedah Muslim Scholars Association)
4. Kelab Darul Ehsan (Darul Ehsan Club) from Selangor.
5. Kelab Melayu Bagan (Bagan Malay Club) from Seberang Perai.
6. Persatuan al-Ehya as-Syariff, Gunong Semanggol from Perak.
7. Perikatan Melayu Bersatu (United Malay Union) from Pulau Pinang.
8. And various Malay welfare associations especially from Penang and Seberang Perai.

The constitution of PAS then, outlined four objectives:
FIRST: To establish an Islamic alliance amongst the Muslim population in order to create a strong movement which would be able to fight for Islamic political causes based upon democratic means.
SECOND: To focus all endeavours to unite all religious administration systems nationwide.
THIRD: To protect and preserve the rights and dignity of Islam and the Muslim population in the country.
FOURTH: To co-operate with other political organisations nationwide which are compatible with Islam to achieve democracy and social justice.

During the early years of PAS' establishment, the organization could be seen as an ulama's club since the organization attained great support from many prominent Malay ulama' of the time as well as the religiously-educated students and teachers. The party was also very much a Malay society, however with a strong commitment towards Islamic ideals (unlike the more secular, western-oriented UMNO). In 1953, PAS' first president, Ustaz Ahmad Fuad Hassan decided to leave the party to join Dato' Onn's multi-ethnic Independence Malayan Party (IMP). This controversial episode of PAS' history erupted due to members' disapproval of Ustaz Ahmad Fuad's proposal for PAS to support IMP in the issue of Federal Constitution. Nevertheless, this event was in fact, a testimonial that PAS was indeed a matured ideology-based movement and not a figure-centric party.

From 1953 to 1956, PAS was led by a medical doctor, Dr Abbas Alias. After that, he was succeeded by Dr Burhanuddin Al-Helmy who were released in 1950. During his era, PAS was developed further as an Islamic populist political movement. His charisma and intellectual vigour were admired by both friends and foes. During his term in office, PAS was an active participant in the struggle of independence together with UMNO and its allies namely MCA and MIC. PAS sent three delegates to the National Conference organized by UMNO and MCA to demand the British to hold the Federal Election in 1954 as the first step towards full independence. During the Conference, PAS has defended his political stand that the Federation of the Malay States is a Malay dominion and her Malay identity is indispensable. PAS also demanded that the Malay Language to become the official language and Islam is given an important role in the establishment of the independent Federation.

Although PAS disagreed with UMNO’s ideals of an independent Malaya, the party did not strangle the noble struggle towards it. In fact, PAS has given full support to Tunku Abdul Rahman, The President of UMNO who went to London to negotiate with the British on the Federation’s path towards ‘Merdeka’ (independence). When the Federation’s first election was held in 1955, PAS contested in 11 constituencies and won 1 seat in the Federal Legislative Council. This was indeed a great moment for the party in introducing and championing further its political ideology in the future.

The sweeping victory of Perikatan (the political alliance combining UMNO, Malayan Chinese Association, MCA and Malayan Indian Congress, MIC) in the 1955 election has enabled UMNO and its allies to establish a government under the leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman. The President of UMNO who went to London to negotiate with the British on the Federation’s path towards ‘Merdeka’ (independence). When the Federation’s first election was held in 1955, PAS contested in 11 constituencies and won 1 seat in the Federal Legislative Council. This was indeed a great moment for the party in introducing and championing further its political ideology in the future.

Although dismissive of the Reid Commission, the party however decided that in respect of democracy and the future of Malaya, it would be better to proactively get involved in the process rather boycotting it. Hence, PAS submitted to the Commission its memorandum detailing the party’s political stands and aspirations for the future independent Malaya. The memorandum reiterated PAS’ demands on recognizing Malay sovereignty in Malaya, the Malay Language as the national language, the role of Islam in the State and strong critics of the jus soli principle.
In February 1957, the Reid Commission announced the Declaration of Constitution for The Federation of the Malay States. As expected, PAS’ demands for Malay sovereignty and Islam to be accepted as the main basis of the constitution were rejected. In response to that, PAS called for an Extraordinary General Meeting to debate the details of the newly-drafted Constitution. For the party, the constitution was rather ‘strange’ and it was a clear betrayal to the Malay population of Malaya. The party also promised that, it will alter the features of the Constitution to be based upon Al-Qur’an and As-Sunnah should the party is given the opportunity to govern the country in the future.

Though PAS disagreed with the Constitution, this did not mean the party rejected the Independence of Malaya. The party shall continue its struggle to create a truly blessed nation based upon Islam. To end, it would be noteworthy to go through words reiterated by PAS’ Vice-President of the Merdeka era, Prof Dr Zulkifli Muhammad who said:

“After Independence, we have arrived at the phase of fulfilling this Independence, here, the second phase of our struggle shall begin, the long-term struggle.
As a political party with an ideology, we believe that the independence has to be filled with our ideology, that is the ideology of Islam or Islamisme. We believe that, only with Islam, this nation and the ummah could be brought to true security and happiness.”