

The 2011 Egyptian Revolution and Islamists in Egypt and Malaysia: Similar Goals, Different Circumstances

Afif Pasuni

Abstract

The opposition Islamist PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, or Pan Malaysian Islamic Party) is one of the oldest political parties in Malaysia. Inspired by Egypt's Ikhwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood [MB]), PAS is also influenced by occurrences in the Middle East; following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, its leaders revamped their organizational structure to entrust key decisions to religious scholars. The ramifications of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, arguably one of the most significant Middle Eastern political events in recent times, thus deserves a closer look.

This short article attempts to look at this revolution's possible impact on Islamists in Malaysia. I argue that Malaysia had already undergone its own version of a revolution in the 1998 *reformasi* (reformation) due to the shared characteristics between the two events: both (1) shared the same premise of alleged political injustice; (2) provided opportunities for Islamists to influence the political discourse, with the difference that in Egypt there was a political vacuum; and (3) utilized the Internet heavily to rally the masses. However, due to Malaysia's freer democratic and electoral processes, political changes there will not be as abrupt as in Egypt. Furthermore, both Egypt's revolution and Malaysia's *reformasi* have hardly ended; the former is a tumultuous ongoing process of battling for the legitimacy of rule by appealing to the masses, while the latter is an ongoing process of appealing to voters in order to come to rule.

Afif Pasuni is associate research fellow in the Malaysian Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), and writes extensively on Southeast Asian affairs with a strong focus on Malaysian politics. He has contributed to many journals, newspapers, and publications, among them *Southeast Asian Affairs*, the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, the *East Asia Forum*, *The Nation*, *The Straits Times*, and *The Malaysian Insider*.

Introduction

I call on all PAS members supporters to join the Bersih rally on July 9 [2011] to demand for clean and fair elections.¹

– PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang

The call for all one million members of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) to join an anti-government rally in Malaysia might be considered ambitious, but certainly not to the party president who took a cue from the peak of the 2011 uprising at Egypt's Tahrir Square. PAS is regarded by many as an extension, or at least a by-product, of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The similarities can hardly be denied; a healthy number of PAS' early leaders studied under MB stalwarts in Egypt and the larger Middle East. Yet this is hardly a precedent in Malaya. In the early twentieth century, Islamist ideas from the likes of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida were already represented in Malaya by, among others, Sayyid Shaykh Sayyid Ahmad al-Hadi, through the Madrasah al-Iqbal al-Islamiyyah in Singapore, and *Al-Imam* magazine.² This trend continued with the increasing number of Malayan students in the Middle East, namely at Egypt's al-Azhar University.³ Historically, the Malayan Students Association in Egypt, or PMRAM, was known to have offered assistance to the Egyptian government during the 1973 Yom Kippur War (also known as the October War) against Israel. While the Egyptian government of that time was led by secularists, the overseas Malaysian Islamic student diaspora nevertheless demonstrated strong resonance toward the concerns of other Muslims around the globe due to their exposure to nationalism fused with religious solidarity.⁴

Consequently upon the completion of their studies and returning to their homeland, the educational background of this particular demographic group began to permeate the organizations in which they served. Particularly, there was an urgency to look at the current social malaise through an Islamic lens and to promote religious solutions for such problems.⁵ PAS became one of the preferred choices for those who decided to get involved in politics, as it was – and remains – the most established Islamist political party in Malaysia.

The Middle Eastern Influence on Malaysian Politics

The Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia by the self-immolation of a street vendor, sparked what was previously almost unthinkable in the modern Middle East: the revolt of citizens against iron-fisted rulers. The revolution resulted

in the fall of the Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, among others. The populist revolt was also replicated in other countries of the region, and the continued political unrest in Syria, Bahrain, and elsewhere serve to remind us of the fragility of even the most persistent rulers.

The Arab Spring is not only putting the focus on the regimes and political systems of the Middle East, for its repercussions can be seen elsewhere around the globe. In Malaysia, where PAS has been one of the oldest and most influential opposition parties, its strong connection with Middle Eastern entities can be regarded as a probable indicator of its future strategy. Certainly past events in the Middle East have influenced Muslims worldwide.

PAS was formed in 1951 after several prominent religious figures broke away from UMNO (the United Malays National Organization), the largely secular and oldest political party in Malaysia. Yet both parties managed to cooperate, even to the extent of forming a temporary unity government in the 1970s. PAS eventually left the coalition and, in response to the Iranian revolution of 1979, changed its organizational structure to make way for the *keimpinanan ulama* (leadership of the religious scholars) model, which entrusts major decisions to the party's religious elites.

Many commentators drew similarities between rise of the *keimpinanan ulama* model and the Shi'i Iranian *vilayat-e faqih* (governance of the jurists) system. Even if the PAS model did not wholly imitate the Iranian system, party members were at least inspired by it.⁶ Nonetheless, it demonstrated how events in the Middle East affected the political outlook of Malaysia's Islamist political groups. The effect is not only limited to a single party, but encompasses the whole political spectrum as other political parties grapple in the "Islamization" race not only to appear more Islamic, but also to link their governance with religious legitimacy. This was clear under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, as the Islamization race forced the co-optation ABIM co-founder and then-leader Anwar Ibrahim. This co-optation enabled the government to maintain a degree of religious influence while effectively crippling one of its more strident critics. As PAS officially undertook the *keimpinanan ulama* model in 1983, the government was also pressured to carve its own path underlining the importance of Islamic teachings in governance and making numerous policy changes to adapt to a suddenly religious rhetoric. Among other moves, the government bolstered the Shari'ah courts and formed such institutions as Islamic universities. Even today, allegations of being less Islamic are not uncommon among opposing politicians.

Although the Arab Spring occurred in the Middle East, its ramifications in Southeast Asian politics, more specifically in Muslim-majority Malaysia, should not be overlooked.

Malaysia's Spring: Present, Future, or Past?

The Islamists have been filling the leadership vacuum in the Middle East following the Arab Spring. Due to PAS' strong resonance with the MB and its large Islamic student representation in Egypt (more than 11,000), we shall look at whether events specifically in Egypt have impacted their Malaysian Islamist counterparts.⁷

In the parliamentary elections following Mubarak's toppling on February 11, 2011, the Islamists managed to win the largest bloc, 37.5 percent of the popular vote, under its Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). As part of the Democratic Alliance of Egypt coalition, in which the FJP was the largest party, they managed to garner close to half of the seats and thus became the dominant force in Parliament. In addition, the Islamists also had the largest blocs in the Constituent Assembly of Egypt, the Shura Council, and won the presidential election held in 2012. While all these gains were wiped out by the July 2013 military coup, it nevertheless displayed the MB's ability to dominate the country's political institutions and get their representative elected as Egypt's first-ever democratically elected president.

All of this was happening at a time when the opposition in Malaysia appeared to be growing in strength; the culmination of events over the past decade led to the resounding performance of opposition parties, including PAS. While what they achieved cannot be considered an outright victory, their recent performances in the last two elections have been impressive. In 2008 they dented the ruling coalition's traditional two-thirds super majority in Parliament and captured five (later reduced to four due to political defections) of the thirteen Malaysian states, which severely weakened the ruling coalition's grip on power. Following these triumphs, the opposition parties – including PAS – formed the Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance) coalition. In the 2013 general election, they continued their upward trajectory by winning more than 50 percent of the popular vote.

Thus it may seem that Malaysia's Islamists are biding their time to replicate the political victories of their Egyptian counterparts. But given that the precursor to the Islamists' win in Egypt were the populist street protests, it is not only pertinent to look at events that might trigger similar responses in Malaysia, but also to determine whether similar events might have already taken place.

The Egyptian Revolution and the Malaysian *Reformasi*

In 1998, Malaysia was rocked by street protests calling for regime change. Unlike in Egypt, this activity occurred at a lower intensity but lasted for a longer time. Here, we would like to draw some similarities between the 2011 Egyptian revolution and the Malaysian *reformasi* demonstrations that started in September 1998, sparked by the arrest of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The shared characteristics of both events warrant a closer look.

First, although occurring more than a decade apart, both events were sparked by alleged political injustice: Mubarak's long rule and the alleged corruption of state institutions, and Anwar Ibrahim's sudden sacking over alleged sexual misconduct. The results were the same: political divisions were played out in the streets. The opposition saw the allegation against Anwar as an excuse to oust him from leadership positions. This, coupled with the opposition's long-standing allegation of corruption and cronyism within UMNO, rallied opposition supporters onto the streets in 1998. Furthermore, some of them regarded Anwar as the Islamists' representative; he was the leader of ABIM who was co-opted into the ruling party's fold, and his affiliation to UMNO was regarded by some as nothing more than a temporary alliance. He toured the country and addressed mass rallies, but was soon arrested. A year later, in the 1999 general election, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition led by UMNO did not manage to obtain more than 50 percent of the votes from the Malay-Muslim majority, which signaled that the ground was shifting.

Second, both events paved the way for Islamist entities to influence the discourse. In Egypt, the demonstrations led to a political vacuum, an opportunity quickly grabbed by the influential MB, whose extensive experience in previous elections saw them through. They quickly filled in the gap to dominate the leadership positions. In Malaysia, there were no sudden vacuums to be filled. In fact, it was the beginning of a process to galvanize the opposition. Yet in both countries, the Islamists found the opportunity to effectively influence the political process. Anwar is a charismatic leader with roots in ABIM, an Islamist youth movement that, under his leadership, actively criticized the government. After being co-opted into the ruling UMNO party, he rose quickly to the rank of deputy prime minister and thus was widely regarded as future prime minister. His sudden sacking brought him back to the opposition's fold, from which he led the call for *reformasi* to topple the Malaysian government. A year after his arrest, the various opposition parties were brought together under the Barisan Alternatif (BA, or Alternative Front) coalition; the

Islamist PAS was a member of this coalition. In the 1999 general elections, PAS was the biggest winner among the opposition coalition's members.

Third, mass public participation was characterized in both events, which were aided by the Internet. Although in 1998 Malaysia's Internet usage was just beginning to become widespread, the *reformasi* period gained momentum due to several prolific writers who blogged and reported extensively on the *reformasi* movement, thereby giving birth to an alternative news media. They later became a direct competitor of the country's mainstream news outlets and was even regarded as one of the main factors for the opposition's strength in subsequent elections.⁸ Egypt, meanwhile, saw the birth of its revolution at a time when Internet usage had already become a staple among middle-class Egyptians. Islamists in both countries utilized blogs and social networking sites to get their points across and harnessed the power of technology to address political grievances and organize rallies.

Enter the Islamists, But with a Slight Difference

Aside from the similarities between the two events, it is pertinent to understand what seems to be a difference between these two Islamist movements, specifically in managing their political opportunities. The moment when both groups of Islamists decided to join the existing political discourses was different. In the case of Egypt, although the MB was already a prominent social and political force, its role in the uprising was surprisingly late because it had decided to be a participant rather than the leader until the revolution was nearing its peak. Yet their decision might simply be due to the very short and abrupt nature of the uprising, which started and reached its climax in only two-and-a-half weeks. While it seemed that the Malaysian Islamists were much faster in deciding and mobilizing their forces in the 1998 *reformasi*, it actually took them close to a month to come forward and forge alliances with other political and non-governmental entities. Furthermore, a formalized political coalition only emerged a year later in October 1999, in time for the country's tenth general election.

What this means is that the timing of the Islamists in taking political action might not be that relevant, and that what should be focused on is how they decided to partake in the political opportunities to further their gains. In other words, *how* they decided to execute their plans could be more important than *when* they decided to do so, as the latter largely rests on the circumstances and opportunities that arose. Here, we can compare how Egypt's FJP and Malaysia's BA managed to gain ground in the parliamentary elec-

tions following the populist demonstrations, which were held roughly one year after the beginning of mass protests. In both cases, the opposition Islamist groups made considerable gains; those in Egypt filled the vacuum left by the previous government, while in Malaysia PAS won the majority of opposition votes in addition to the state of Terengganu and their stronghold state of Kelantan.

The different timing of entering the fray might very well be due to the different political strategies necessitated under different political circumstances. Unlike in Egypt, the relatively freer Malaysian political system has allowed opposition parties to participate in elections since the country's inception. For instance, PAS has been governing its stronghold state of Kelantan in north peninsular Malaysia for more than forty years. Due to a better (although not perfect) practice of democratic process compared to Egypt, the grievances in Malaysia can be translated into votes during election. Political entities continue to persuade and dissuade voters through policy changes, social projects, and propaganda. But in Egypt, the more oppressive decades-long situation that had locked down political participation suddenly became undone in under three weeks. Mubarak's dethronement resulted in a political vacuum and, also partly due to the ambivalence of the powerful military, the situation pushed opposition political entities into the limelight. As one of the most well-organized political groups in Egypt, it is hardly surprising that the MB took charge of the situation and came to power. Notwithstanding, these different political opportunities with a very varied time frame demonstrated how the Islamist parties took advantage of the situation in which they found themselves.

Conclusion

To say that Malaysia's Islamists would require a million-man mass rally to take over the country is antithetical to the country's political dynamics, where voters have long been expressing their support or opposition to the government with their votes. Malaysia might have already had its version of the 2011 Egyptian revolution – the 1998 *reformasi*. Both events have not ended; the former is a process of convincing the population and state institutions of their legitimacy to govern, while the latter is an ongoing process of appealing to the population in order to govern. Similarly, both very much hinge on working within the democratic system.

More recently in Egypt, millions took to the streets to oust President Mohamed Morsi, the MB politician who won the presidential election held in June 2012. Just one year later in July 2013, Egypt's powerful army took over

the government, selected a new interim president and ministers, and announced a roadmap for new elections. While this effectively cancelled out the MB's substantial gains since Mubarak's ouster, its temporary ascension to power signaled the party's readiness to fill the power vacuum. Furthermore, the MB's long-held clout over large segments of Egyptian society will unlikely take a significant hit; should its members decide to take part in a new election, its established grassroots base is still the most extensive in the country, which gives it a good chance to see favorable results.

In Malaysia, the effects of the *reformasi* fluctuated in the initial phase but persisted in the long run due to PAS' evolving political strategy. Following the 1999 general election, the Islamists had initially decided to be more adamant as regards their Islamist agenda. But following a poor showing in the subsequent general elections, they backtracked in order to form a coalition with two other secular parties and managed, for the time being, to consolidate their position as the main opposition coalition. In doing so, PAS is working closely with two secular parties that have political creeds that clearly contradict its own.

This is where the MB differs from its Malaysian counterpart, for the latter, with decades of experience in a working democratic system, evolves quickly based on election results and voter feedback. While the Malaysian Islamists drew direct inspiration from their Egyptian associates, the latter should also take some cues from the former. The MB needs to practice quicker navigation in the democratic terrain, especially in a fragile democracy still in its infancy. Taking a leaf from the Malaysians, the party's Islamist identity and rhetoric could be tempered by promoting those universal values shared among the greater Egyptian society. In Malaysia, this was achieved by working within the coalition. While doing so did lead to open squabbles among party leaders on the coalition's direction, PAS' toning down of its Islamist image, in addition to the parties agreeing on a single election manifesto, did give them an unprecedented result in 2013. The coalition won more than 50 percent of the popular vote – an impressive outcome – although this was not enough to assume power due to Malaysia's first-past-the-post electoral system. The coalition initially contested the result, although in the end its members decided to accept and work within the boundaries of the democratic system.

Unlike in Egypt, where there were sudden political vacuums due to the military's engagements, such a scenario is highly unlikely in Malaysia. The Malaysian Islamists will have to take the more conventional route to reach their goal in a country where democracy is satisfactorily observed. But they

should bear in mind that even with an unconventional path, it took their Egyptian predecessors over eighty years to come to power, only to find themselves in a quagmire just one year later. The seemingly constant state of fluctuation in Egypt will take some time to settle down, and therein lies the challenge for its Islamists to continue navigating the democratic path to power in an increasingly hostile environment. And even for PAS, should it manage to come to power in Malaysia through democratic means, what Egypt taught its members was that not only persuading the voters matters, but also that the state's institutions have to be on their side.

Endnotes

1. PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang, calling the party's one million members to join the populist Bersih 2.0 rally in July 2011.
2. William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 66; Radin Soenarno, "Malay Nationalism, 1896-1941," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 1, no. 1 (March 1960): 1-28; Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied and Dayang Istiaisyah Hussin, "Estranged from the Ideal Past: Historical Evolution of Madrassahs in Singapore," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 25, no. 2 (2005): 253.
3. Judith Nagata, "Religious Ideology and Social Change: The Islamic Revival in Malaysia," *Pacific Affairs* 53, no. 3 (1980): 413.
4. Zulkifly Abdul Malek, "From Cairo to Kuala Lumpur: The Influence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood on the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM)" (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2011), 7.
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
6. Nagata, "Religious Ideology and Social Change," 413; Hussin Mutalib, "Islamic Revivalism in ASEAN States: Political Implications," *Asian Survey* 30, no. 9 (September 1990): 884; Farish A. Noor, "Blood, Sweat, and Jihad: The Radicalization of the Political Discourse of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) from 1982 Onwards," *ISEAS* 25, no. 2 (August 2003): 209, 215.
7. Malek, "From Cairo to Kuala Lumpur," 5.
8. Afif Pasuni and Joseph Liow, "Sign of the Times: Election Fever, Recurring Themes, and Political Malaise," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2012* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012), 177.