



## Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and Challenges in Johor

Muhamad Helmy Sabtu<sup>1</sup>, Shah Rul Anuar Nordin<sup>1\*</sup>, Khairul Azman Mohamad Suhaimy<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre for General Studies and Co-curricular,  
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400 Batu Pahat, MALAYSIA

\*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30880/jts.2022.14.02.006>

Received 08 September 2022; Accepted 15 November 2022; Available online 15 December 2022

**Abstract:** PAS's existence in the state of Johor has spanned more than six decades. Nevertheless, the party's performance in the state election is seen to be still in an uncertain state until today when it failed to win a satisfactory number of seats both at the parliamentary and state assembly levels. This situation suggests that PAS is facing a serious problem that needs attention and a thorough solution to enable the party to get out of the prolonged political lethargy syndrome. By using a descriptive case study design, this article aims to unravel the challenges faced by Islamic party that make it difficult for them to expand in the state of Johor. The results of the study show that there are three main challenges faced by PAS, namely limitations on religious access, party identification and current sentiment of oppositional politics that are not in their favor. Therefore, PAS is advised to rejuvenate its image and set the direction of the party clearly so that the penetration rate of the party's influence can be elevated in the state of Johor.

**Keywords:** Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Pakatan Harapan (PH), general election, Johor Darul Ta'zim

### 1. Introduction

The Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) in the state of Johor was established as early as 1954 through the opening of its first branch in Johor Bahru, making the party one of the earliest and longest established opposition parties in the state of Johor (Tarmizi, 1992). Even so, the history of PAS's performance in elections starting from the first election up to the 14<sup>th</sup> General Election (hereafter written GE-14) showed less than encouraging statistics. Throughout the 14 rounds of elections held until 2018, PAS only started winning seats in GE-11 held in 2004, which is about five decades after its establishment in the state of Johor. In the GE-14 held in 2018, PAS became a party that fell further behind when the state of Johor was successfully captured by a party under the PH coalition, while PAS's performance plummeted compared to the consistent improvement it had shown in the previous two GEs. After winning the first seat in the Senggarang State Assembly in GE-11, PAS continued to improve its performance in the following two GEs.

In GE-12, the number of state assembly seats won by PAS was two in Sungai Abong and Maharani, while the number continued to increase to four with the increase in two other state assembly seats namely Parit Yaani and Puteri Wangsa. This victory was generally contributed by the political cooperation factor forged by PAS with other opposition partners at that time through Pakatan Rakyat (PR). But this cooperation did not last long when PAS slowly moved away from the alliance in June 2015 making it alone as the third block in the GE-14 competition (Muhamad Helmy, Khairul, Nurul Aimi & Muhyamin, 2021). In the historic GE, PAS in the state of Johor seemed to be embarrassed when it got poor results despite putting up the most nominations, namely 20 parliamentary seats and 41 state assembly seats. Relatively speaking, the performance of PAS which only won one DUN seat was far less than other opposition parties

such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP) (14 DUN seats, 5 parliamentary seats), the People's Justice Party (PKR) (5 DUN seats, 7 parliamentary seats) and even younger parties such as Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH) (9 state assembly seats, 1 parliamentary seat), and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU) (8 state assembly seats, 5 parliamentary seats). The performance shown by PAS therefore suggests that PAS faced rejection in the state of Johor (Election Commission, 2018).

The situation further raised the question that why is it difficult for PAS to get a place in the state of Johor? What is the main challenge faced by the Islamic party in the state that it is unable to penetrate the state? In order to answer the questions, this paper presents three main challenges faced by PAS Johor, namely the limited access to religion, the party identification that existed among the community (especially the Malays) towards the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), as well as the current sentiment and political elements of the opposition (oppositional politics) who were not in favour of PAS in the state of Johor. These three challenges will be elaborated in more depth in the results and discussion section. First, the writing will begin by reviewing the background of PAS in the state of Johor as well as their political history. The writing will then present the research methodology used to obtain information and the analysis process. After reporting the results, the writing will be concluded with a conclusion section and recommendations for further research.

## 1. Background of PAS in the State of Johor

Compared to other opposition parties, PAS started earlier in the state of Johor. PAS Johor was officially established on 19 March 1954, which is approximately three years after the establishment of PAS through the opening of the first branch in Johor Bahru (Mohd Fadli, 2019; Ismail, 2011; Tarmizi, 1992). The branch was headed by Ariffin Alias as the head, assisted by Othman Abdullah as the secretary and Yusuf Abdul Rahim as the treasurer. Eight committee members were also appointed to lead the leadership. Just like PAS at the central level, PAS in Johor state also had continuity with the Hizbul Muslimin movement which was banned by the British. Ariffin Alias himself, for example, is the former leader of Hizbul Muslimin Johor and was one of the sponsors of the establishment of the party in 1948. Most of the early members of PAS Johor also consisted of former members of the party. In the early stages of establishment, most of those who joined PAS consisted of religious teachers, mosque imams, government officials and workers. As soon as it was established, the membership of the Johor Bahru branch of PAS increased to 200 people.

The second branch of PAS Johor is in Benut, Pontian which was established on 6 May 1954. Only within two months after its establishment, PAS membership in the area has reached 750 people. In the following years, PAS Johor continued to develop rapidly. By 1960, a total of 50 PAS branches were recorded in the state of Johor ("50 chabang", 1960). The encouraging response of the people of Johor to PAS allowed the party to field candidates in the first GE in 1959. In the GE, PAS fielded candidates in three parliamentary constituencies and nine more in the DUN constituencies. However, the total percentage of votes received by PAS Johor in the general election was not encouraging, namely 2.3% at the parliamentary level and 2.6% at the state assembly level (Tarmizi, 1992). This performance is an early sign that PAS was not the party of choice for the people of Johor state. PAS is still too small a party when compared to its rival, UMNO, which often questions the ability of the Islamic party ("Berkuasa di Johor? PAS mimpi", 1962).

Realizing that the party's ability and influence was still limited, PAS Johor never missed the opportunity to participate in every round of elections held. According to Mohd Hasbie (2014), GE-4 in 1974 was the only GE that was not contested by PAS because it was not allocated any seats by Barisan Nasional (BN) (PAS at that time was a component party of BN). UMNO's action caused some PAS grassroots leaders to stage a protest by running on independent tickets that year (Tarmizi, 1992). For PAS Johor, their participation in the election was not merely to chase victory, but rather an opportunity to expand the party's influence in each area ("PAS Johor mahu uji pengaruh", 1969). The election was a *da'wah* ground that PAS could use to meet all levels of society and voter segments to show their existence in the state as well as to spread the agenda of Islamic struggle supported by the party. This position was in line with the goal of PAS Johor, which was to introduce PAS's Islamic policy to all Muslims in the state ("Chita2 PAS", 1959).

According to Tarmizi (1992), PAS Johor until 1992 had gone through two eras, namely the old era and the ulama leadership. The old era started from the establishment of PAS until 1981. At that time, PAS only operated as a political organization and not as a *da'wah* movement. Like UMNO, PAS also fought for the rights of the Malays and Muslims, the difference is that PAS's position was more conservative in matters involving religion (Funston, 1980). In the state of Johor itself, PAS actions and activities were not very active and only appeared during elections. However, the image of the party began to change after the beginning of the era of ulama leadership. PAS Johor began to highlight the party's image as an Islamic movement and fight for Islam in totality, thereby abandoning the agenda of Malay nationalism. PAS began to fight for the goal of establishing an Islamic state and implementing hudud more seriously (Muhamad Helmy, Amalin & Khairul, 2021). Various training programs were also introduced to bind PAS members to the discipline of the Islamic struggle. PAS Johor's transition at that time was also helped a lot by the entry of a large number of Malaysian Islamic Youth (ABIM) activists into PAS. The post of state PAS commissioner was also taken over by Hassan Hussein who was one of the founders of ABIM Johor (Tarmizi, 1992).

Based on the history, the position of PAS in the state of Johor since its inception can be described as not very strong. This reality is proven by the history of PAS's election performance in the state where the Islamic party has never won any parliamentary or state assembly seat during the 50 years of its existence in the state. The difficulty and inability of PAS to expand its influence is clearly mentioned by scholars who studied Johor politics. Through their research, PAS was mentioned as "...has always been small in Johor..." (Wan Saiful, 2017: 35), "...has not been able to make any significant electoral inroads in Johor..." (Hutchinson, 2018: 12), "...have struggled to make any inroads over the years..." (Mohamed Nawab & Rashaad, 2018: 369), "...never having a formidable presence in Johor..." (Lee & Nicholas, 2020: 26). The statement not only clearly shows that PAS had been facing a serious accessibility issue in the state of Johor for a long time, but it is also seen that the Islamic party had yet to find a way out of the problems faced. If this matter is not fully resolved, it is feared that PAS Johor will continue to face the syndrome of prolonged political fatigue, which is the continued inability to be a competitive party to win in the election. Therefore, this writing intends to examine in more depth the main challenges faced by the Islamic party in the state of Johor.

## 2. Methodology

This study was carried out using a fully qualitative approach. The research design chosen is a descriptive case study where data was obtained by using in-depth interview methods as well as analysis of some selected documents. Information was obtained from primary sources which were through semi-structured interviews with six key informants in addition to secondary sources involving academic journals, scientific studies, dissertations, books and media sources related to the research topic. The six main informants who were interviewed were Datuk Abdul Kadir Jasin (renowned senior journalist), Professor Dr. Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid (expert of Political Islam), Ustaz Abdullah Husin (Commissioner of PAS Johor), Yang Berhormat Tuan Haji Suhaizan Kaiat (former Speaker of Johor State Assembly), Tuan Guru Dato' Dr. Ustaz Haji Mahfodz Mohamed (a member of PAS Ulama Shura Council) and Tuan Mohd Kamal Ulum (secretary of UMNO Youth Johor). From the interview transcripts and the documents obtained, the analysis process was then carried out using thematic analysis techniques to detect significant topics, ideas and patterns, as well as being discussed descriptively to clearly see the issues and problems that are the focus of the study (Boyatzis, 1998).

## 3. Findings and Discussion

The slump of PAS in GE-14 after showing improved performance in the previous two GEs suggests the premise that the Islamic party was incapable of fighting alone in the state of Johor, instead required the assistance and cooperation of its fellow opposition parties (Farish, 2016; Hamdan, 2020; Thock & Tan, 2016; Wan Saiful, 2017). This is as described by Abdul Kadir (2021) that PAS in Johor was only capable to "...establishing a foothold but not taking root..." well. This study argues that the situation is due to three main obstacles or challenges faced by PAS in the state of Johor namely, (i) limited access to religion, (ii) party identification with UMNO, and (iii) current sentiments and elements of political opposition that are not in favour of PAS.

Firstly, the limited access to or attainment of religion by PAS is due to several factors. Among them is due to the substantive role played by the sultan in matters concerning religious affairs in the state of Johor. In the state of Johor, the issue of Islam is not an isolated issue. But unlike in other states or even at the Federal level, matters involving Islamic religious affairs in this state are dominated and neatly controlled by the ruling king, the Sultan of Johor. This situation has indirectly reduced the space for PAS to penetrate the state. The Sultan of Johor exercises his authority in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution of the State of Johor 1985 which is also in line with the Federal Constitution which states that the sultan acts as the head of the Islamic religion and Malay customs in their respective states (Hutchinson, 2018; Norshahril, 2017; Milner, 1995). In the state of Johor, this designation has subsequently authorized the sultan to intervene to ensure that the position and practices of Islam continues to be preserved. Through a research study conducted by Lee (2017), this matter was also acknowledged by the people of Johor themselves who agreed that the Sultan of Johor is a good protector of Islam in the state.

As the head of the state's Islamic religion, the Sultan of Johor imposed several forms of enforcement in controlling Islam in his own state. Among them is to promote and strengthen the practice of traditionalist or sufism-oriented Islamic trends among the people. According to Norshahril (2017), traditionalist Islam is more friendly to Malay customs and traditions in addition to valuing the dignity and position of the royal family. Historically, the close relationship between the Sayid Hadrami group and the Johor royal family has indeed been built from the time of the first modern Johor sultanate, namely Sultan Abu Bakar, where the group acted as an influential political and economic elite (Ahmad Fauzi & Syaikh Abdullah, 2021). This allowed the spread and strengthening of the traditionalist trend widely in the state of Johor so much that some muftis of the state of Johor also came from the Sayyid group such as Syed Alwe Tahir al-Hadad (Ahmad Fauzi, 2021). The practice of traditionalist Islam by the sultan and the people of Johor also means that the state is also more difficult to accept the ideas of Islamic reform, especially those brought by outside parties (Azhar, 2014).

Regulation and enforcement by the sultan is also carried out from the highest hierarchical level of the Islamic religious authority down to the people at the lower level. At the highest level, the sultan made appointments to important positions in the Islamic bureaucracy. The highest authority of Islam in Johor is the Johor State Islamic

Religious Council (MAIJ) whose members are appointed by the sultan. Under the council, there are several other departments such as the Johor State Islamic Religious Department (JAINJ), the Johor Mufti Department and the Johor State Sharia Justice Department. All these bodies are placed directly under the patronage of the Sultan of Johor as the head of the Islamic religion. Among the most important positions in Islamic religious affairs is the mufti appointed by the sultan. The Mufti plays a dominant role in the public sphere of society, especially in controlling and determining Islamic practices that can and cannot be practiced by the community. The fatwa issued by the mufti also needs to be fully obeyed and implemented by the community through the people's Islamic religious institutions such as government departments, schools, mosques or suraus (Hutchinson, 2018; Norshahril, 2017).

In addition, educational institutions such as religious schools are also placed under the control of the Islamic bureaucracy. In Johor, there are 578 religious schools, but all of them are placed under the administration of the state religious authorities including those related to fund and financial affairs. The number of private religious institutions such as madrasahs, *tahfiz* centers and *pondok* schools in this state is very few, and religious-based educational institutions like this are widely used by PAS in other states, especially to recruit its members (Wan Saiful, 2017). The chain of *pondok* schools in Johor that offer traditionalist Islamic studies also face a similar situation. Potential religious students and teachers will be sent to continue their studies at higher education institutions that provide traditionalist Islamic education such as Al-Azhar University before returning to the state of Johor to be absorbed or promoted to strategic positions (Hutchinson, 2018; Norshahril, 2017). This situation shows that the development of the Islamic religious education system in Johor is so well planned and closely controlled, thus causing difficulties for PAS to access the community.

“There are SRITI, Islamic Primary School, but they are not as strong. PASTI is a lot. There are a lot of PASTI, but it has not reached the point where it wants to bind the community to really support PAS, it has not reached that stage. More support is available. If the average [like states] Kelantan, Kedah, Terengganu, there are PASTI, there are SRITI too. There are still pondoks, there are also madrasahs. For example, the late Pak Nik Lah Arshad. Father of Datuk Nik Amar. At one stage during the elections, not yet won. Then, he had school. His school was progressing, his students were increasing... up to four thousand... It turns out that because of the number of people and the relationship between parents, the next election [PAS] won. Believed with the support of parents earlier. There are many like that in Terengganu, Kedah is also there, we [in Johor] have but not many students... There are not many students, about 200... [but] there [Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu] four thousand, support, right... So this influenced that.” (Abdullah, personal communication, December 9, 2021).

The Sultan of Johor also plays an extensive role in protecting Johor's Islamic religious affairs from outside interference, including from the Federal government. The relationship between the Sultan of Johor and the Federal Government in matters of Islamic religion has been seen as cold due to several conflicts of interest that occurred between the two parties. In a number of statements, His Majesty openly criticized and questioned the role of the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (JAKIM), the Federal Islamic religious agency under the Prime Minister's Department that tried to interfere in the affairs of Johor's Islamic religious affairs. His Majesty has repeatedly emphasized that JAKIM only has an advisory role and that the decision-making power regarding Islam rests with the Malay Rulers. In matters of fatwas also, His Majesty insisted that only the sultan can approve the fatwas presented by the MAIJ (Norshahril, 2017; 2017b). Following the relationship between the Sultan of Johor and JAKIM which was seen to be somewhat strained and cold due to several issues that arose, His Majesty finally ordered that JAINJ cut ties with JAKIM in 2017.

In addition, the sultan also controls religious speakers who could deliver lectures and talks in the state of Johor. In 2016, His Majesty ordered that speakers and preachers from outside obtain a permission permit from MAIJ first before they can teach or lecture in the state of Johor. Any influence, thoughts and teachings that are not in line with what is set will be prevented and curbed from spreading. The religious authorities will also take action to revoke the teaching permit given if the individual spreads political influence or delivers a political lecture in the state's Islamic institution. His Majesty further emphasized that the people of Johor should be proactive in curbing the spread of religious extremism and heresy, in addition to only learning from religious teachers who are certified and licensed by the state government. While in order to curb the spread of new Islamic schools of thought, beliefs such as liberal Islam, pluralism, Shia and Salafi-Wahhabi were also fatwaed as heretical (Norshahril, 2017; Wan Saiful, 2017).

Based on this situation, the Islamic atmosphere in Johor is not seen to be on the side of PAS. According to Hutchinson (2018), the development of PAS faces difficulties in the state due to three factors namely, control over Islamic educational institutions, the Islamic appearance of PAS which does not fit the traditionalist Islamic identity in Johor, as well as the strengthening of the traditionalist Islamic identity in the Malay-Muslim community of Johor. PAS, as proven by Riduan (2015), Mohamad Fauzi (2007) and Wan Saiful (2018), is an Islamic party with the ideology of *Kaum Muda* due to the fact that most of the party's ulama leaders have received training and inspiration from Islamic reformist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. The thinking is then applied to PAS members and activists

through a series of *usrah* and *tamrin* organized at the party's internal level. This has indirectly caused segregation due to the exclusivity of PAS members towards the local community.

“And then I remembered, they are already close to the program of this congregation, they have to be tolerant of things that can be compromised. If the traditionalists and neo-traditionalists reject Syed Qutb, it is not like accepting Syed Qutb's view is an obligatory thing in religion. And there is still chaos among the PAS activists who continue to practice Salafi beliefs that say *maulid* is heresy. The one who said a safe prayer feast, Yassin, is heresy. That's even more difficult because it will conflict. It will cause conflict in society... If you don't embrace a view that is considered extreme like Syed Qutb's, then why is it being discussed that their *tamrin*, their *usrah*, for example. So that thing is something that can be compromised.” (Ahmad Fauzi, personal communication, December 4, 2021).

Secondly, PAS also faces obstacles from UMNO which is more influential and can be described as too dominant especially among the Johor Malay community in the rural areas. Mahfodz (2021) describes the state of Johor as “*Darul UMNO*” due to the party's hegemonic position which adds to PAS's difficulty in penetrating society. Compared to PAS, UMNO has a longer history and is closer to the Johor Malay community. UMNO was born in the state of Johor in 1946 through a Malay Congress held at Istana Johor to oppose the idea of a Malayan Union promoted by the British (Hutchinson, 2018; Wan Saiful, 2018; Funston, 1980). UMNO's success in thwarting the idea of Malayan Union has given great credit to the Malay party so much that it is considered a symbol of “unification” and “protection” for the Malay people from the domination of foreign nations in this country (Milner, 2019). More than being a defender of the rights of the Malays, UMNO also has a traditional relationship with the Kings, nation building and civil servants. In the state of Johor, UMNO in a short time became a dominant party so much that UMNO and Johor are described by Hutchinson (2018) as having such a deep and inseparable relationship.

UMNO's strength in the state of Johor is generally contributed by various factors. From the point of view of party leadership, many UMNO leaders at the central level come from the state of Johor where this state has produced many national political figures from the pre-independence era until now. UMNO also has a large number of members, making grassroots support so strong in this state. With the high number of members, the competition for the position of party leader has also indirectly become competitive, thus enabling the birth of more capable and authoritative leaders from Johor UMNO (Hutchinson, 2018). Wan Saiful (2018) emphasized that Johor UMNO's strength lies in the support of women for the party. This role is effectively played by the UMNO Women's Movement wing which consistently helps build a support network for the party among women voters that this wing is absorbed and integrated into the social structure of the local community in the state. Since half of Johor's voters are women according to GE-13 data, winning the hearts of women is also the key to the success of a political party in the state of Johor (Wan Saiful, 2018).

Traditionally, FELDA voters have also been loyal supporters of UMNO for decades (Muhammad Naim, Zulkarnain & Fatimi (2019). Hutchinson's study (2018) shows that the support of FELDA voters for UMNO in the state of Johor is higher than in other states which is 86 percent. In other states, the support of FELDA voters for the party is only around 61 to 78 percent. According to Junaidi (2020) and Muhammad Naim et al. (2019), the loyalty and support given to UMNO-BN is due to the sense of indebtedness of the settlers towards the government that has granted land, implementing oil palm planting incentives as well as various forms of aid and bonuses that the government gives every year. The settlers' economic dependence on UMNO leads to the creation of political patronage between UMNO as the government and the settlers (Maznah, 2015). UMNO's political involvement in the affairs of FELDA started at the early stage. For example, candidates who successfully get an offer need to get certification and support from UMNO leaders in their respective areas (Khor, 2015). In the FELDA settlement, UMNO opened a party branch for the purpose of monitoring as well as ensuring its presence in the social structure of the community. UMNO is also involved in the farm management structure. This situation forged a relationship between the settlers and the UMNO-BN government (Hutchinson, 2018).

The sentiment of the people of Johor towards UMNO has been relatively good since the establishment of the party. This position allows UMNO to gain solid support from voters in the state of Johor, especially from the Malay community. In GE-13, BN won 38 of the 56 state assembly seats contested. Out of that number, UMNO has the largest share of 32 seats. The areas won by UMNO are rural areas with a Malay majority. This situation illustrates the support of voters from the race, which comprises half of the population, towards UMNO. Wan Saiful (2018) also found that the political narrative played by UMNO against Malay voters also had a profound effect. Most of the villagers expressed concern that the Malays would lose political power if DAP came to power as happened in Singapore. Sentiments of fear like this are often instilled in the minds of the rural Malay community which are conveyed through party channels either directly from community leaders or political leaders who are UMNO members or from pro-UMNO media such as TV3, *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* (Jamaie, 2018). He explained that UMNO has not only won the narrative and people's thoughts against the opposition, but they have also integrated into the soul and life of the local community where UMNO and the community seem to be one inseparable entity. This makes it difficult for PAS to gain support even though it has been established in the state for a long time.

“There are three state administrations. Village, local administration, district office administration, and also executive administration. It’s consecutive. One after another, that means the impact will reach until the village head. On the condition that the head of the village does the work. If the appointee doesn’t do the work, it’s no use, no matter which party... UMNO, if we talk about welfare, UMNO is the welfare party. If our example is to give, the welfare party means that if there are poor people in the village, we are the ones who move to donate, we don’t want to, I don’t deny that there are other parties who also give. But we are used to that. Like I said earlier, if you want *rewang* near the village, UMNO people will do it, set up tents, UMNO people help *rewang* cook, cut onions, and so on. If there is a death, UMNO people help dig the grave, UMNO people help bury, bathe the body. So these things are compatible with the UMNO people themselves.” (Muhd Kamal, personal communication, January 31, 2022).

According to Muhd Kamal (2021), UMNO’s strength in the state of Johor lies in the large number of members and grassroots as well as being in almost every area. Each village and residential area has its own UMNO branch where the committee and community leaders are usually filled by party members. The committee also acts as an intermediary between the party and the community for matters involving welfare and society including when holding feasts, mutual help and even when there is a death. This makes the Malay community in the rural areas indirectly be assimilated and naturally become integrated with UMNO. This situation causes difficulties for PAS in their attempts to penetrate the Malay community. Furthermore, PAS also shares the same target voter group as UMNO, namely Malays who live in rural areas. The clash between the two parties is always unbalanced where PAS is usually treated as “foreigners”, unlike UMNO which is treated as “our people”. This identification of party ultimately contributed to the failure of PAS to grow in the state of Johor.

More worrying for PAS, many among the clerics in the state of Johor are also members and loyal supporters of UMNO as stated by Ahmad Fauzi (2021), Mahfodz (2021), Suhaizan (2021) and Hutchinson (2018). According to Mahfodz (2021), UMNO is not only supported by clerics at the state level, but also at the local level such as in village areas. These are individuals who are so respected by members of the community due to their high level of knowledge. In most cases, PAS scholars themselves cannot overcome the influence and popularity of UMNO scholars even at the local level. There is also a PAS branch that was opened only after the UMNO cleric had passed away. Meanwhile, Suhaizan (2021) mentioned that UMNO’s Islamic struggle is in line with the Islamic understanding of the Johor people. The situation has further strengthened the relationship between the Malay community in the state of Johor and the party in question compared to PAS. Through the support of local clerics who are pro to them, UMNO also succeeded in expanding the party’s influence on the entire social structure of society including the dominance of mosques, suraus, religious authorities up to the position of the number one authority in Islam, the mufti. This factor makes UMNO a hegemonic party in the rural Malay community and at the same time causes difficulties for PAS to break through the wall. This situation is different with PAS in the state of Kelantan. According to Azmil (2018) as well as Siti Ruzana, Rahila, Azlizan and Russli (2020), the Islamic party successfully mobilized the support of *pondok* clerics, imams and religious experts in rural areas by developing a strong opposition political narrative to oppose UMNO and religious bureaucrats.

“Okay, let’s look at Johor, apart from Johor, I’m not sure if there is another or not, is the only state that has a former mufti who became a Menteri Besar. Okay, Tan Sri Hasan Yunus... He is actually a cleric and a former student of Tok Kenali if I am not mistaken. And then, became Mufti of Johor and later, entered politics and then won. Became a Menteri Besar and this is actually very rare. I’m not sure if something like that happened in Kelantan or Terengganu. In Kelantan and Terengganu, the Islamic politics is closer to PAS politics. But not in Johor. It is closer to UMNO politics, it is one of the reasons.” (Ahmad Fauzi, personal communication, December 4, 2021).

The third challenge faced by PAS in the state of Johor is related to the development of the opposition movement. Johor as discussed by Hutchinson (2020), Junaidi (2020), Wan Saiful (2018) and Thock and Tan (2016) is an important state in the election and a target for the opposition parties due to the size of its large count of parliamentary seats (second largest after the state of Sarawak). Meanwhile, UMNO, as explained earlier, has a large number of advantages in the state of Johor compared to other opposition parties. According to Hutchinson (2020), the gerrymandering set every eight years also favors UMNO because their strength lies in rural Malay areas in the state.

Meanwhile, the opposition movement in the state of Johor was facing difficulties in breaking through the strength of UMNO and BN. Until GE-13, DAP was the only party that successfully challenged UMNO’s dominance with a total of more than 10 seats won at the state assembly level while four were won at the parliamentary level. Other opposition parties such as PAS in the GE also started to strengthen their position by winning four state assembly seats. According to Thock and Tan (2016), DAP became the biggest beneficiary in what was termed as “political tsunami 2.0” or “Chinese tsunami” in 2013. Also surprising, DAP also for the first time succeeded in winning the FELDA seat in the Kulai parliament with a majority of over 13,000 votes (Muhammad Naim et al., 2019). BERSATU and AMANAH as new parties established before GE-14 were also targeting victory in the state of Johor. According to Wan Saiful’s study

(2018), BERSATU managed to attract the support of a number of the Malay community in the state of Johor, especially the youths, but the biggest challenge for the party remains the Malay community in the rural areas and women. AMANAH was targeting mixed seats that had 30 to 40 percent Chinese voters.

It turned out that the strategy paid off when PH won 36 of the 56 seats contested in GE-14, which is a number that was almost a two-thirds majority victory. Popular support for UMNO-BN also plummeted to only 36 percent compared to 47 percent in GE-13. On the part of PH, the factor that drove the victory of the coalition was due to the integrity of the cooperation and consensus shown by them to face GE-14. PH used a mega-campaign strategy by holding a series of large-scale tours and talks that also featured all the leaders from all of its component parties. This is different from BN which campaigned enclosed-door and on a smaller scale. PH also highlighted Mahathir Mohamad as a candidate for Prime Minister who had previously never been mentioned in the election campaign. The logo used by PH was also a single logo which was the symbol of PKR to represent all candidates under PH including from DAP, AMANAH and BERSATU (Mohd Izani & Abdul Razak, 2019; Muhamad Nadzri & Jamaie, 2018). The results of GE-14 showed that BN's stronghold was now only in the eastern region of Johor which was also a rural area. While the areas controlled by PH were urban and developing areas in the western and southern regions of the state of Johor (Mohamed Nawab & Rashaad, 2018).

The choice of PH over BN by the voters of Johor was also a manifestation of their dissatisfaction with the BN government. This is due to several economic and local issues that prompted the protest vote against UMNO-BN. In this case, the economic issue became the main issue in GE-14. Junaidi (2020) through his research ahead of GE-14 found that 93 percent of respondents raised issues related to the economy, the increase in the price of goods and oil. According to him, if GE-13 was a clash between Malay-Muslim and non-Malay-Muslim interests, GE-14 would have more urgent mass issues such as economic pressure and the increase in the cost of living for the people. The Goods and Services Tax (GST) taxation policy introduced by the BN government in this regard made people's lives more difficult when every cost of daily goods was also taxed. However, it was unfortunate when the government acted to ignore the complaints of the people and, in fact, the majority of BN leaders defended the government's actions (Mohd Izani & Abdul Razak, 2019).

Among the local issues raised by PH is related to the issue of the largest real estate project in Johor, namely Forest City, which was heralded as an issue of national sovereignty when the property was bought by investors who were mostly from China (Junaidi, 2020). Meanwhile, on the BN side, UMNO also focused a lot on local issues in the state of Johor, but the political narrative highlighted in the campaign was described by Mohamed Nawab & Rashaad (2018) as unclear. The content of the talk still used the issue of UMNO-BN's success in the past in creating prosperity in the state. Narratives like this were not only far from the sentiments of the people, but were also recognized by the Johor UMNO leader, Khaled Nordin as "romanticism" and "remembering the past" which was no longer relevant for UMNO to use (Mohd Izani & Abdul Razak, 2019). The campaign of BN in GE-14 was also found to be trying to distance itself from the image of Najib Razak as the Prime Minister at that time as he did not go down to campaign in Johor and campaign materials such as posters and speeches also did not touch much on his leadership (Mohamed Nawab & Rashaad, 2018). UMNO-BN's strategy in highlighting local issues in the campaign turned out to be a failure.

In addition to local issues that did not favour UMNO-BN, national issues also faced a similar fate. According to Junaidi (2020), the factor of national issues more strongly influenced the political decisions of the people of Johor in GE-14. The factor of national issue had also given PH an advantage (Mohamed Nawab & Rashaad, 2018). Among the national issues that received attention in the GE-14 campaign series included the impact of GST, the 1MDB scandal, FELDA, FGV as well as the increase in the cost of living that was not handled well by the BN government (Junaidi, 2020; Hutchinson, 2019; Mohd Izani & Abdul Razak, 2019; Henry, 2018; Mohamed Nawab & Rashaad, 2018; Muhammad Naim et al., 2019). These issues were closer to young voters, voters on the fence as well as new voters who are voting for the first time as these groups were affected from an economic point of view in addition to getting diverse and open information from social media. Social media literacy also applied to urban and suburban voters, especially youths under the age of 40 who were also seen rejecting BN and the Najib administration (Junaidi, 2020).

The opposition made these national issues the main content of their campaign (Junaidi, 2020; Hutchinson, 2019; Mohd Izani & Abdul Razak, 2019; Muhammad Naim et al., 2019; Henry, 2018; Mohamed Nawab & Rashaad, 2018; Muhamad Helmy & Muhamad Nadzri, 2018). These issues were used so well through a political narrative that was compiled to further strengthen the sentiment of the people's opposition to the government on these issues. All PH leaders brought up federal government issues in a series of organized talks and campaigns. Mohamed Nawab and Rashaad (2018) mentioned that the narrative of the opposition campaign in GE-14 was clear and consistent throughout the campaign period. Themes of speeches such as "abolish GST" and "bring down kleptocrat leaders" were repeated continuously. In the speeches delivered, opposition leaders used terms and storylines that were easier for the people to understand (Mohd Izani & Abdul Razak, 2019; Muhammad Naim et al., 2019).

The issues that were raised were then closed with an offer of a manifesto and solutions to the issues faced by the people. Among them included abolishing GST, providing job opportunities, building affordable houses and delaying repayment of loans from the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) (Muhamad Helmy & Muhamad Nadzri, 2018). In comparison, PH's campaign message on national issues was more structured and consistent while BN as the government was unable to provide a good counter-answer to ease the sentiment and instead used an evasive

approach. BN's campaign messages were otherwise disorganized and mixed up resulting in a greater political gap between the party and the electorates (Mohamed Nawab & Rashaad, 2018).

Meanwhile for PAS, the performance of the Islamic party in the state of Johor was greatly influenced by the cooperation established with PR until 2015. The lack of cooperation with other main opposition parties has caused PAS's achievements to decline to the lowest level compared to GE-12 and GE-13. The popular vote obtained by PAS in GE-14 at the Johor state assembly level plummeted to 10.53% which represents only 118,582 votes. This amount is different from the PAS popular vote in GE-13 which reached 41.56% representing 292,702 votes. From the figures, PAS has clearly become a fringe party after no longer having political cooperation with its other opposition partners. The number of votes obtained by PAS in GE-14 which is not much different from GE-11 which is 100,301 votes clearly shows that the traditional supporters of PAS in the state of Johor did not actually show a significant increase. On the other hand, the overflow of votes they got in the previous two GEs was due to the support of the voters of other opposition parties including the Chinese voters. Based on this development, the current sentiment as well as the development of the opposition movement in the state of Johor is clearly not in favour of PAS which makes this matter the biggest challenge for PAS. In other words, PAS is unable to get two groups of voters, namely the rural Malay group who largely remain loyal to UMNO and the mixed group of voters in the suburbs and cities who withdraw their support from PAS and vote for opposition component parties in PH.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, the survival of PAS in the state of Johor in the future is closely related to the approach that will be implemented by the Islamic party to manage the three biggest challenges that have been mentioned in this writing. The most important objective of the solution is to allow the influence of PAS to penetrate the society in this state better. In order to allow PAS's agenda and struggle to reach the people, PAS must first minimize all the obstacles that have been mentioned. For the first challenge, which is the barrier from the point of view of access to Islam, PAS should rejuvenate its image to be more lenient with the Muslim community in the state of Johor. PAS should present a party image that is more inclusive, traditionalist, moderate, people-oriented and professional in line with the image of the state of Johor as a holistically educated and developing state. PAS should not rely entirely on the use of religious sentiments and rhetoric to gain support because such an approach is seen to only further distance the party's position with the community. While for the second and third challenges involving UMNO and PH respectively, PAS should set a clear and consistent direction, especially in the context of the selection of allies. This writing is of the view that whether it is UMNO or PH, both will give PAS its own advantages and disadvantages. But what is more important for the Islamic party is that they should not move alone in facing the election in the state of Johor. Instead, PAS needs to have political cooperation with a more dominant and powerful party to increase the party's penetration rate in the state concerned.

#### Acknowledgement

This article is part of a research grant sponsored under the H857 project (Tier 1) of Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM).

#### References

- 50 cabang PAS di-Negeri Johor. (1960, 16 Februari). *Berita Harian*, p. 3.
- Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid & Shaikh Abdullah Hassan Mydin (2021). Islamic Da'wah in the Malay Peninsula: Contributions of the Sayyids of Early Times. *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam*, 11(1), 46-70.
- Azhar Ibrahim (2014). *Contemporary Islamic Discourse in the Malay-Indonesian World: Critical Perspectives*. Petaling Jaya: SIRD.
- Azmil Tayeb (2018). Green Waves of Change In The East Coast: PAS and Anti-UMNO Backlash in Kelantan. *Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies* 45(2), pp. 232-250.
- Berkuasa di Johor? PAS mimpi -Sulaiman. (1962, 14 Oktober). *Berita Harian*, p. 5.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Chita2 PAS menyebar dasar Islam. (1959, 3 September). *Berita Harian*, p. 4.

- Farish A. Noor (2016). *The Malaysian Islamic Party PAS 1951-2013: Islamism in a Mottled Nation*. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD).
- Funston, J. N. (1980). *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of The United Malay National Organisation and Party Islam*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd.
- Hamdan Aziz (2020). Keberadaan PAS di Sabah Serta Pencapaian dalam Pilihan Raya Umum, 1986-2018. *Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies* 47(3), pp. 1-30.
- Henry Loh (2018). Rakyat's Victory Vindicates Decades-Long Struggle. In Francis Loh & Anil Netto (Ed.). *Regime Change in Malaysia: GE14 and The End of UMNO-BN'S 60-Year Rule*. Petaling Jaya: SIRD.
- Hutchinson, F. E. (2020). Situating Johor. In F. E. Hutchinson & Serina Rahman (Ed.). *Johor: Abode of Development?*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- Hutchinson, F. E. (2019). GE-14 in Johor: Shock or Just Awe? In F. E. Hutchinson, & Lee Hwok Aun. *The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?* Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- Hutchinson, F. E. (2018). *GE-14 in Johor: The Fall of The Fortress?*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- Ismail Said (2011). *Menegak Agama Membela Bangsa: Perjuangan PAS 1951-1970*. Kuala Lumpur: Unit Buku Harakah.
- Jamaie Hamil (2018). *UMNO dalam Politik dan Perniagaan Melayu*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Junaidi Awang Besar (2020). PRU-14 dan Pasca PRU-14: Analisis Politik di Negeri Johor Darul Takzim. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 17(5), pp. 81- 98.
- Khor Yu Leng (2015). The Political Economy of FELDA Seats: UMNO's Rural Fortress in GE-13. In J. Saravanamuttu, Lee Hock Guan & Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman. *Coalitions in Collision: Malaysia's 13th General Elections*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- Lee Hock Guan (2017). *Johor Survey 2017: Views on Identity, Education and the Johor Royal Family*. ISEAS Perspective no. 84. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- Lee Hock Guan & Chan, N. (2018). *Electoral Politics and The Malaysian Chinese Association in Johor*. Trends in Southeast Asia no. 20. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- Maznah Mohamad (2015). Fragmented but Captured: Malay Voters and the FELDA Factor in GE13. In J. Saravanamuttu, Lee Hock Guan & Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman (Ed.). *Coalitions in Collision: Malaysia's 13th General Elections*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- Milner, A. (2019). *Melayu atau Kemelayuan: Menelurusi Sejarah Idea*. Petaling Jaya: SIRD.
- Milner, A. (1995). *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mohamad Fauzi Zakaria (2007). *Pengaruh Pemikiran Assyahid Sayyid Qutb Terhadap Gerakan Islam di Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Jundi Resources.
- Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman & Rashaad Ali (2018). Localizing Victory: GE 14 and the Electoral Contest in Johor and Kelantan. *Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies* 45(2), pp. 367-385.
- Mohd Fadli Ghani (2019). *PAS 1951-1957: Penubuhan, Dinamisme Organisasi, Kepimpinan dan Ideologi*. Batu Caves: KUIZM Publication.
- Mohd Hasbie Muda (2014). *PAS & Pilihan Raya: Analisis Pencapaian Parti Islam SeMalaysia dalam Pilihan Raya Umum (1959-2013)*. Petaling Jaya: Megamind Leadership Consultancy.

Mohd Izani Mohd Zain & Abdul Razak Ahmad (2019). Permata Bertukar Pemilik: Cabaran dan Masa Depan Politik Johor Pasca PRU ke-14. Dalam Zulkarnain Abdul Rahman, Rosmadi Fauzi & Amer Saifude Ghazali (Ed.). *Pilihan Raya Umum ke-14: Isu dan Cabaran Malaysia Baharu*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.

Muhamad Helmy Sabtu, Amalin Sabiha Ismail & Khairul Azman Mohamad Suhaimy (2021). Dasar Islamisasi Politik UMNO dan PAS pada Era Abdullah Badawi dan Najib Razak. *Journal of Social Transformation and Regional Development Special Issue*, 2(3), 82-91.

Muhamad Helmy Sabtu, Khairul Azman Mohamad Suhaimy, Nurul Aimi Razali & Muhaymin Hakim Abdullah (2021). Islamist conservatism in politics: Approach, political strategy and performance of the Malaysian Islamic Party in the 14th General Election. *JATI-Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 26(2), 1-34.

Muhamad Helmy Sabtu & Muhamad Nadzri Mohamed Noor (2018). *Persaingan Ideologi PAS dan AMANAH: Dalam Politik dan Pilihan Raya*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Muhamad Nadzri Mohamed Noor & Jamaie Hamil (2018). Politik, Pengundi dan Faktor Melayu/Bumiputera: Analisis Terhadap Kegagalan Barisan Nasional dalam PRU 2018. *JEBAT: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies*, 45(2), 386-408.

Muhammad Naim, Zulkarnain & Fatimi (2019). Prestasi UMNO di Kerusi Parlimen Kawasan FELDA, Johor. Dalam Zulkarnain Abdul Rahman, Rosmadi Fauzi & Amer Saifude Ghazali (Ed.). *Pilihan Raya Umum ke-14: Isu dan Cabaran Malaysia Baharu*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.

Norshahril Saat (2017). *Johor Remains The Bastion of Kaum Tua*. Singapore: ISEAS.

Norshahril Saat (2017b). *Johor Survey 2017: Attitudes Towards Islam, Governance and The Sultan*. ISEAS Perspective no. 83. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.

PAS Johor mahu uji pengaruh, bukan kerusi. (1969, 23 April). *Berita Harian*, p. 6.

Riduan Mohamad Nor (2015). *Pengaruh Ikhwanul Muslimin Terhadap Gerakan Islam di Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Jundi Resources.

Siti Ruzana Ab Ghani, Rahila Omar, Azlizan Mat Enh & Russli Kamaruddin (2020). Perkembangan Gerakan Islam – PAS di Kelantan 1957-2000. *E-Bangi: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 17(4), 40-59.

Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya (2018). *Laporan Pilihan Raya Umum ke-14*. Putrajaya: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia.

Tarmizi Mohd Jam (1992). *Masa Depan PAS Johor*. Kuala Lumpur: Lajnah Penerangan PAS Johor.

Thock, K. P. & Tan, Y. Y. (2016). DAP dan Politik Baharu di Johor. Dalam Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail & Sity Daud (Ed.). *Pilihan Raya Umum ke-13: Kesenambungan Politik Baharu, Kekentalan Politik Lama*. Sintok: Penerbit Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Wan Saiful Wan Jan (2018). Islamism in Malaysian Politics: The Splintering of PAS and The Spread of Progressive Idea. *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 9(4): 128- 153.

Wan Saiful Wan Jan (2017). *Parti Amanah Negara in Johor: Birth, Challenges and Prospect*. Singapore: ISEAS.