

Headline **Doing good by PAS**  
Date **09. Oct 2008**  
Media Title **The Sun**  
Section **National**  
Circulation **174179**  
Readership **171000**

Language **ENGLISH**  
Page No **12,13**  
Article Size **1017 cm2**  
Frequency **Daily**  
Color **Full Color**  
AdValue **43359.59**



# Doing good by PAS

DR SITI MARIAH MAHMUD, A FIRST-TIME MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT (KOTA RAJA) AND A CENTRAL COMMITTEE MEMBER OF PAS, REPRESENTS THE NEW DYNAMIC PROGRESSIVE VOICE OF THE ISLAMIC PARTY. SHE SPOKE TO **RATHI RAMANATHAN** ON ISSUES RANGING FROM WOMEN'S ISSUES, THE NEP AND HOMOSEXUALITY.



We have been toying with the idea of having non-Muslims ... as members for the last ten years.

## **theSun: You were a practising medical doctor. When and what made you turn to a political career with PAS?**

Siti Mariah: I was a practising doctor for less than three years before I joined URM as a lecturer, in pre-clinical science. I still do a bit of clinical work like diagnosing hypertension, diabetes etc.

I joined as an ordinary member of PAS in 1993 but only became politically active in 1997 when I resigned as a lecturer from UPM. I chose PAS because of my religiosity and Islamic tendencies. Islam is a way of life, so understanding of politics is one thing, but the party reflects Islamic values. All in my family are PAS members, including my mother who rose to be deputy chief of the Muslimat (women's wing).

## **Interestingly, there are more women drawn into politics through PAS. Did your husband object to your joining PAS?**

My husband is also a PAS member. I waited until the youngest of my six children started Standard One before I made the decision to be politically active in 1997. Before that I also had a full-time job.

## **Do you miss being a doctor?**

I do miss it as I love seeing patients. But a doctor's job is demanding and my priority was then with my family. I was also helping my husband run his business before being elected MP.

## **As a first time Member of Parliament, how are you finding public life? How has it affected your life and how are you coping?**

I hardly have time for the family. I have to reschedule the time with my family due to my parliamentary and constituency demands. But I am enjoying these new demands because I love meeting people. Furthermore, I no longer have to worry about earning an extra income as there is more financial independence when you are an MP and it gives me the flexibility to check in on the family business when I need to but I have delegated my duties to my daughter.

## **PAS appears to be reinventing itself. What can you tell us about the party's progressive agenda?**

It has a progressive agenda. Islam is a universal religion. In the last 10 years of engagement with the various sectors of society, we have found that Islam has been propagandised. However, when we took time to explain the universality of Islam and that Islam protects all and gives rights to all, we found non-Muslims to be very receptive.

Race is not an issue as Islam is the overarching banner which is why we have created a new slogan - PAS for all - which communicates the message that we will fight for everyone's right. However, PAS is an old party ... now 50 years old and

we have a wide spectrum of members with intellectual and economic capacities. Our grassroots are mainly Malay rural folk and now urban and lately, we have attracted non-Muslims, too.

We have been toying with the idea of having non-Muslims, especially the younger generation of Indians as members for the last ten years. We know we cannot be the main and dominant party without the non-Muslim support. They also want us to consider extending membership to them. Our own members consist of old-timers and non-progressives who fear that if we have non-Muslims as members our Islamic agenda will be diluted and we have conveyed that fear to our non-Muslim supporters.

## **How have you attracted urban support?**

It has been through our openness toward new ideas. When it comes to Islamic knowledge and understanding of politics, the urban members are more exposed, well-read, and intellectually stronger compared to our core rural supporters. But we still have to keep in mind our core supporters. They believe Islam is a way of life but in terms of knowledge, we base our interpretation on the Madinah (Medina) model. But we have to adapt accordingly so we have intellectuals who do this and this process in turn has attracted the urbanites.

## **So would you say the road to a progressive agenda and to re-invent PAS is based on getting the non-Muslims on board or the reforms have to happen before wooing the non-Muslims?**

I think it has to be both. You must engage the non-Muslims and also maintain your core supporters. Right now the non-Muslims are prepared to join us and have expressed that they are happy to just join as members.

However, they would not have the full

rights as standing members and cannot join party ranks.

The head of the party will always be a Muslim and the ulamah will also have a final say in policy matters even if we did allow non-Muslims in as members.

Our decisions are based on the Quran and the Sunnah and we do not make decisions without lengthy debate which needs consensus building. The party head can use veto powers but even before that, he must have consensus.

For example, our Hindraf supporters, because they don't belong to a party machinery, have a harder time accepting changes and understandably want to see instant improvements. So we worry also that there may be some tension within the party should they join.

The status quo is that we would rather work on the basis of accepting our members as equals and at the same time educate our non-Muslim aspirants on our party struggle. If our core members can accept this then we will allow non-Muslims into our party, otherwise, there will be conflict.

## **Is one of area of contention the Hudud laws?**

Hudud law is only the criminal part of Islam. Until and when people can understand those laws, we will not implement them. There remains a lot of ignorance surrounding Hudud laws as we were never given the opportunity to explain. Hudud laws would apply to only criminals and the process of law is still the same as any other, only the final punishment differs. As Muslims we have to believe in the ultimate law of God and make sure it can function.

It is not unlike what women's groups and the civil society underwent when lobbying for the rape laws. Without proper guidance and education, there was a lot of resistance.

We will need also to engage academicians and experts on jurisprudence before we implement the laws and then we need to train lawyers, too. Furthermore, as a member of the Pakatan, we also have to ensure that the other parties also accept the Hudud laws. If we cannot convince them, how would we be able to convince the rakyat? It is not on the top of our agenda as uppermost in our list is social justice and the welfare of the people.

## **How large are the progressive voices within PAS?**

The progressive voices are evident in the middle ranks and they are now large, and growing.

## **Let's talk about the progressive agenda of women's rights and gender equality. What efforts has PAS made towards this end?**

Islam itself guarantees women's rights but it is the practices that are not in line. As far as women's rights are concerned, we have no problem with the methodology. We do need to understand husbands' rights and wives' rights. And, if we are talking about rights, we also have to talk about

responsibilities.

In PAS, these things are clear, and we do not agree with the position that the party is gender biased. It is up to the women in the party to chart their role in this society.

It is how you quote the laws as the principles are there but lawyers, jurists have to interpret them in a way that is just for both men and women.

On the issue of polygamy, men talk about it as their right, but it is not. There are clear conditions that must be satisfied and women can refuse to allow it. If we were to remove polygamy now, women would be the victims as many marriages are not even registered. So the focus in our view is on enforcement. Are these men in fact getting their wives' permission?

Polygamy would not be widespread unless women have consented to it. That is why polygamy is not about your right... it also concerns the right of the family. So we need women and men to understand the laws and issues surrounding polygamy.

**Is PAS engaging Sisters (SIS) in Islam?**

Unfortunately, not actively. I think it is because of their image that there are problems in engaging them. SIS have done wonderful work, it is just their approach. Customs and traditions are difficult to overcome. We have our ulamah who think in a certain way. Sometimes progressive ideas are perceived to come from the West and when they fail to succeed in engaging these, the ulamah become defensive.

**Are you and other women in the Muslimat (women's wing) pushing for a progressive agenda for women?**

We are focusing on the role of women, yes. Ten years ago women in PAS generally were happy not to be in the front line but that view has shifted. We played an active role and demanded, in subtle ways and pushed for ourselves to participate politically, for example, in elections.

Now we are witnessing PAS women candidates in the front line but we do not support the idea of quota, because we believe these candidates must be capable as much effort has been made in training them not to feel inferior. If we see women who are capable, we push them forward. We have seen steady progress. For example, in previous elections only 11 women were fielded and in the 2008 elections, that number rose to 13. At the state level, we have ensured that in both Kelantan and Kedah executive councils women are represented.

**Is there a ceiling for women in PAS?**

Yes, one day, but in my life time, perhaps as high as vice-president, not president. The party is not ready for that kind of change.

**You are a member of the steering committee on the Coalition Against Health Care Privatisation? Can you explain what the coalition intends to focus on?**

We have to press on with



**P**AS has never actively engaged itself with people living with HIV and the homosexuals.

the "health for all" agenda and we want to protect our public health sector so that it is accessible to all citizens and non-citizens. There are new forces like health tourism which have negatively impacted on the delivery of quality health services as more doctors are drawn to higher salaries in the private sector. The extending of private wings in public hospitals is also a big worry as it cannot but have an impact on the quality of healthcare services when doctors will be overworked.

While we understand that health tourism brings in foreign exchange, we would prefer to focus on paying the doctors and paramedics better wages, fees.

**What is PAS's position on HIV and homosexuality? Shouldn't the Health Ministry be concerned about sodomy laws that prevent men having sex with men to come forward for prevention, testing, care and support?**

HIV is just like any other disease. It can easily move into an epidemic stage. Sad to say, PAS has never actively engaged itself with people living with HIV and the homosexuals. But we don't support the Health Ministry's position regarding distribution of condoms.

The reason being, we worry that values are not being addressed and certain sexual practices become a norm and these practices will flourish.

Religion is a powerful tool for behavioural change and should be part of the HIV response. We only focus on harm reduction programmes without trying to change their values. Our experience has

been that religious leaders are only engaged at the end and made use of.

**So you are saying you are not involved in the policy formulation and that any consultation is tokenism?**

Yes. Only when they want us to talk about our perspective, is our position and viewpoint asked. We don't have a committee looking into issues of HIV, AIDS and sex workers for example unlike other areas like poverty eradication. When NGOs and other civil society groups involve us in their consultation we will direct our resources and information so that PAS can be better informed.

However, it is clear that there is no active attempt to impart religious values. NGOs will call it indoctrination. But we need to impart values and at the same time, hold their hand. When one focuses on helping sex workers, you must also offer them real informed choices and the right support services to get them out of sex work permanently.

**Would it be because of the fear of further stigmatisation that NGOs have been reluctant to engage religious leaders and PAS members?**

We have to train our people. For myself, there is no problem as being trained as a doctor I can hold anyone's hand.

Engagement will help us to be less judgmental. We are less judgmental now than in the past because we are engaging. We want to hear what these groups have to say. I don't blame them from staying away and fearing PAS. For example, religion does not allow me to shake hands with men and non-Muslims when I visit my constituency but I compromise by using a glove as I know there is little time to educate them on this. After the elections, by engaging non-Muslims and talking to them they now accept why I cannot *salaam* them and they accept it and respect my principles. Even the issue of entering a Hindu temple ... there is nothing haram about me going into a Hindu temple but as a politician I worry because of the backlash from Muslims. However, now my Indian constituents do understand me.

**So PAS can never accept homosexuality?**

We accept the people but we cannot accept the act. Our focus is getting them to come back to the straight path. When we engage them, our aim is to correct their values. Whether we succeed in their rehabilitation or not is not our responsibility. We give them the option of listening to our message. Whether you change or not is between you and God.

**What is PAS's position on the NEP? Many would argue it is a form of institutionalised racism? Would you agree?**

Initially, it was not like that when it was developed on the premise of narrowing the income gap between the Malays and non-Malays and to eradicate poverty irrespective of race and religion. But yes, it has developed to become institutionalised racism. While Malays have benefited, it is the Indians now who are impoverished.

**So NEP led to the poor condition of the Indians?**

Yes, but I would not just blame the NEP but also the MIC leaders who have not brought up the Indian issues to the forefront. That is the role of leaders just as Umno has been strong in advocating for the Malays.

While PAS's position, however, is to reform the NEP, my personal position is that it being a form of institutionalised racism it is difficult to reform and must be dismantled because it is so entrenched. We have to start afresh with a new affirmative action for all who need it.

**Do you support the idea of a system that leans towards a safety net based on income levels?**

The government has already extended its safety net programme but it has to be more than that. I have already raised in Parliament for a separate fund to be set aside so that one child per family is given the opportunity to go to university. We have learnt how powerful education can be in lifting families out of poverty. Also, we need poverty eradication to be more targeted so MPs can help families directly and not have to refer the needy to two or three ministries. PAS would also lend its support for an

Anti-Discrimination Act to protect all who are discriminated based on race, religion, gender. Discrimination is happening not just at the public sector but the private sector as well. There is so much fear that if the NEP is dismantled, the Chinese and Indians will not hire the Malays. This legislation is aimed at protecting all and alleviating such fears.

**What is PAS's position on human rights?**

We believe in social justice and basic political and civil rights, freedom of expression, assembly, but it must

be contextualised within collective rather than individual rights. The bottom line with the Islamic struggle is whatever we do, Islam is to be respected and we can practise our religion and if we are suppressed we will fight it. It is our duty to convey and spread the Islamic way of life. We do not coerce people to follow Islam. However, the principles of participation is encouraged through lengthy debates. We never come out with a position without a debate among all party ranks. We believe change has to come from the top and the bottom.

