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PAS (News Focus)

PAS' IMAGE AS AN EXTREMIST PARTY FADING

By: Ali Mamat

KOTA BAHARU, June 24 (Bernama) -- Since its birth in 1951, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) has often be seen by its opponents particularly Umno as an extremist party which exploits religious and racial issues.

Eventhough PAS leaders have rejected the label, Umno leaders are convinced that only religious and racial sentiments have helped PAS to set up base in several states where the majority of the people are Malays/Muslims such as Kelantan and Terengganu.

However the label is less heard of lately. The mainstream daily newspapers which generally echo the voice of the Barisan Nasional component parties particularly Umno are not attacking PAS with such a lable as frequently as before.

Now several questions arise over the issue. Is PAS really an extremist party? If so, why are issues such as accusing others of being infidels are not heard of anymore and also incidents such as prayers being led by two imams and the branding of Umno people as haram from kampung to kampung are no longer making the headlines.

The question arises as to whether the latest developments reflect a change of attitude on the part of the Umno people towards PAS or whether PAS is changing its strategy and approach in its struggle.

These questions found an answer when PAS Spiritual Leader and Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Haji Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat indirectly acknowledged that PAS had used a hardline approach in its struggle.

He also admitted that opponets were now softer towards PAS following his efforts to change the image of PAS from a party which "attacked" to a party which explained its actions and this had created PAS members and supporters who were moderate in their actions and approach.

Speaking at a party for journalists here, Nik Aziz compared the past PAS pattern of struggle to an ironsmith intending to make a parang from a thick piece of iron.

"The iron will have to be put in the fire first, then hammered then put in the fire again and then pounded and then back in the fire again and then beaten up until a thin blade emerges."

"Only after it is thin can it be bent and turned into a parang. Once it takes the form of a parang, the ironsmith cannot pound it hard but instead should polish it and beat it gently and carefully," he said.

He said it was the same with the PAS struggle which was based on the propagation of Islam. In the initial stages Islam had to be spread in an aggressive way to introduce, instil and attain the objectives of the struggle.

"Now Muslims have generally accepted PAS and its struggle. Hence our approach also needs to change with emphasis on gentle explanations so that Muslims' love for the PAS' religious struggle is enhanced," he said.

He said: "The nearly completed parang will be spoilt if the ironsmith handled it roughly to bent or polish it."

Nik Aziz mentioned, by way of example, the hardline approach adopted by PAS in the past such as making bon-fires of newspapers which carried newsreports which the party did not like.

"I was one of those who set fire to the Utusan Malaysia. Now however I am a permanent subscriber of the newspaper," he said.

He also acknowledged that this new development in PAS was linked to the change in attitude shown by Umno leaders and also by the newspapers which

were increasingly milder in their reports of PAS activities.

"In Islam, it is incumbent upon its followers to return good for good," he said.

One of the ways PAS was returning the good shown to it by its opponents was to support the economic recovery efforts initiated by the Federal Government led by Umno.

"While we differ in ideology, the PAS Government will contribute towards the National Fund set up by the Federal Government to counter the current economic slowdown," he said.

The PAS' gentle approach was evident at the opening of the Salor Bridge at Pasir Mas by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad several years ago.

Nik Aziz said even though he was the Menteri Besar he was not invited to the function but setting aside any feeling of embarrassment, he did attend the function to honour "our Prime Minister." His move prompted several thousand PAS supporters to join in the function.

"When Dr Mahathir announced that the bridge will be a vital link between the residents of Pasir Mas and Pekan Salor, I had to amend the statement."

"I told Dr Mahathir that the bridge is in fact a vital link between the Kelantan PAS Government and the Federal Government led by Umno," he said.

Another evidence of the new gentle approach adopted by PAS was when Nik Aziz hit at out at foreigners who called for Dr Mahathir's resignation over his statement on Jews.

Nik Aziz had urged foreigners not to interfere in the country's internal affairs as they had no right to determine who should be the country's prime Minister.

"PAS defended Dr Mahathir in that issue as it involved a question of the nation's dignity and honour," he said in a serious tone and jokingly added, "If there should be a call for Dr Mahathir to step down let it come from PAS."

What is clear now is that the approach had brought benefits to the people of Kelantan as could be seen from the many projects being located in the state.

Many of the projects were under the jurisdiction of the Federal Government.

One of the projects is the petroleum and gas based venture to be developed by the state government's Keloil and Umno's KUB in Bachok.

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