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Opposition pact: Reality or just another dream?

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OF late, the white moon-on-green flags of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pas) have been raised in areas not normally associated with Pas activity.

One of these areas must surely be the upmarket suburb of Taman Tun Dr Ismail in Kuala Lumpur where a new branch was launched late last month in the rather grand residence of the party's latest recruit Datuk Dr Hassan Ali, the man who made his name running motivation courses and speaking on government TV stations.

And in the short time that Hassan has been with Pas, his ranking as a ceramah crowd-puller has risen almost to the level of the reigning star speaker, Mohamad Sabu, or Mat Sabu as he is better known.

Hassan is considered somewhat of a catch for Pas and is apparently the most famous of the surge of new members into the party since the political changes of the last half year or so.

This, in spite of the fact that Hassan is less known for the depth of his religious knowledge than for his talent at holding an audience captive, at even making them break into tears and his fondness for sprinkling his talks with naughty jokes and anecdotes.

Nevertheless, Hassan serves a certain purpose - he fits the sort of moderate image that Pas has been aspiring to.

For instance, says Kelantan Pas Youth leader Husam Musa: "People think Pas is full of uztaz but now we have Hassan, a professional."

The effort at moderateness has been most discernible the past few months, specifically in the aftermath of the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as the party experienced a surge in membership and circulation of its newsletter, Harakah.

Pas has definitely emerged as the leader of the pact among the political parties and groups opposed to the Barisan Nasional.

For instance, it plays a leading role in Gerak, a coalition of opposition political parties and NGOs launched at the Pas Gombak headquarters a day after Anwar's arrest.

The Pas-led Gerak has even somewhat eclipsed Gagasan Rakyat Malaysia, another assembly of more or less the same composition but which was formed much earlier.

Even Adil, the group headed by Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail is not free of the Pas shadow and a key Adil figure is said to be concerned of the overly Pas flavour that Adil seems to be acquiring.

One could say then that the opposition is more or less ready for battle.

"The prospects are very, very good, insyallah," says Mat Sabu.

Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang is a little more sober: "The groundswell for change is there but in terms of electoral gains, it's very hard to say or predict."

Lim is not pulling the underdog card. This very seasoned politician - he was first elected MP in 1969 and has been through more ups and downs than any other Malaysian politician - knows better than to be overly optimistic of what is, after all, an extremely fluid game.

After all, politics is not only about ideas and principles, politics is also about timing.

And for those in the game, an issue is assessed from the way it affects opinions as well as votes.

Party people insist he is still studying the political situation.

For instance, one of DAP's most promising women politicians Teresa Kok

recalls how the DAP had received a tremendous boost of support-cum-sympathy after the sentencing of Lim Guan Eng.

"Our Malacca office reported how thousands of people, including MCA members, turned up at our office to express their sympathy. They said we would have their vote," she says.

But the mood changed dramatically when street demonstrations began in Kuala Lumpur and the same people who had expressed support suddenly did not seem as sure as before.

This may explain why DAP has been lukewarm about reformasi activities. Even Lim's views of reformasi seem somewhat detached.

"It's a very generational thing. There are the Anwarians ... Anwar means everything to them.

"Then there are those who see reformasi as something beyond Anwar. In the long term, something has happened where Malay politics will not be the same again.

"But again, it remains to be proven in electoral terms."

The DAP secretary-general is also keen to stress that the party is not involved in any electoral alliance - yet, that is.

"We (in DAP) have never regarded either Gagasan or Gerak as an electoral arrangement," he says in measured tones.

Lim's calculated focus on the electoral impact of issues has led some to view DAP as "trapped in a vote-catching type of politics".

"The trouble with DAP is they are in it for the vote. Any kind of pact will only be calculated in terms of political votes," accuses ex-DAP MP Dr Kua Kia Soong.

Kua is also a leading figure in the human rights group Suaram, which is among several NGOs keen to see an opposition pact hammered out before the general election.

"They have to get their act together," says Kua.

Pas, he adds, will have to come out more specifically on what they have to offer ... a concrete stand on the economy, education, culture and mother tongue in the context of Islam. They have to explain to those outside of Kelantan what sort of development to expect."

The NGOs also seem more eager about sealing an opposition alliance than the opposition parties themselves - apart from smaller parties like Parti Rakyat Malaysia who would be adrift at sea in the absence of a pact.

"They are trying to push us into an electoral pact," says DAP's Kok.

DAP's reluctance to rush into a pact is understandable. It is all too aware that its traditional Chinese electoral base is simply leery of any pact that implies an endorsement of the Islamic State.

Hence, Lim says: "If there's going to be any discussion of a pact involving DAP and Pas, we have to reach a common agreement that the next general election is not about achieving the Islamic State but about issues like justice, freedom, democracy, good governance. That has to be the premise."

Pas, which is itching for a greater urban presence this time around, would stand to gain from such sort of pact.

The party has been the chief beneficiary of the political events of past months and is even talking about controlling the "Malay crescent states" - Terengganu, Kelantan, Perlis and Kedah.

At Pas ceramah, the grandfatherly-looking party president Fadzil Noor is being touted as the next Prime Minister while Hassan has offered himself, presumably tongue-in-cheek, as the next Menteri Besar of Selangor.

Wan Azizah's name is being dropped everywhere as their candidate for Kubang Pasu, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's constituency; and this is another feature of Pas - they are quick to clutch on to an opportunity.

Although Pas is quite aware of non-Muslim misgivings over the Islamic

State, it remains stoically glued to the goal.

Some like Kelantan's Husam simply cannot understand the non-Muslim anxiety.

"Justice, good governance, accountability, transparency ... that's the substance of an Islamic State. What is there to be afraid of?" he says.

Yet, when reminded that existing examples of the Islamic State are hardly encouraging, for example the recent Newsweek report on the crackdown on liberal forces in Iran, Husam retorted: "Oh, that's the foreign media."

Mat Sabu on his part often tries to deflect the issue with the following: "If we can agree on 98 out of 100 things, why concentrate on the two things we cannot agree on. We concentrate on common issues."

Others argue that "if we don't like Pas and their Islamic State, we can always boot them out the next round".

Arguments like these seem a little too pat for DAP's Lim and his response is usually an arched eyebrow and an ironical grin.

Lim is all too aware that in spite of the scale of street protests last year and the undercurrent of discontent on the ground, the majority of Malaysians are basically middle-of-the-roaders who will think and think again before going for a radical solution, and who tend to play safe rather than take risks.

Any attempt to gain the middle ground would have to take this into account.

However, that does not mean Lim is not optimistic. He is actually rather upbeat about denting the BN's two-thirds majority.

"But it can be spoilt by irrational exuberance, by people believing they are on the verge of toppling the BN, forming the Government, forming the next Cabinet.

"There are people who are so carried away, they think this is the end of Umno, the toppling of Dr Mahathir. I may be proven wrong but I think that's misreading the situation. If they go on like this, they may even help preserve the BN's two-thirds majority."

Those who have working experience in a coalition with Pas understand DAP's caution.

Pas, says former Parti Melayu Semangat 46 figure Shabery Chik, can be quite dogmatic about what they believe is their right.

"There is this big brother thing about them," he says.

Thus, according to Shabery, they think they have more right to a decision because one, God is on their side; two, they have control of one state; three, they have been working against the Government for many years.

Besides, they have the cash (their ceramah collections rarely total less than RM10,000), the manpower and the crowds, so they call the shots.

"You are not on equal footing with them especially if you are a smaller party or group ... don't ever dream of it," says Shabery.

And as Kua points out, Pas people are very personable on a casual basis, but once they put on their party cap and get into their rhetoric, "they become very different persons".

Meanwhile, Kedah Umno's Rosnah Majid who has been following all this very closely says: "They get together every general election, then they fall out. I'm just waiting to see what happens this time."

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