

06/06/1999

Pas embraces new script by proposing to admit non-Muslims

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NURSING a slight cold after the 45th Pas muktamar (assembly) in Kuala Lumpur, the newly-elected Youth chief was interrupted a few times by calls on his handphone during an interview at a Pas office in Alor Star.

A television station contacted Mahfuz Omar, 42, twice, in 20 minutes or so, inviting him to take part in a talk-show with Umno Youth's Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein. Others wanted to confirm his appearance at the party's many ceramah - Mahfuz is a rising star.

Already, Mahfuz has thrown himself in earnest into the political ring, daring Hishammuddin to a debate at the National Stadium in Bukit Jalil.

From now on, Mahfuz and Pas will have to negotiate the frenzied final lap before the general election.

For one, expectations of a good showing at the polls are evidently high within the party as delegates to the muktamar over the last weekend kept saying this was the "best opportunity" for Pas.

Some delegates asked Pas to tread with care in cobbling together the electoral alliance with others. There was an addendum, though. "Pas will have to lead the alliance," said a resolution passed by the muktamar - a point which may not be taken too kindly by other parties.

Interestingly, there were delegates, in a way, who seemed not to mind the pact with the DAP which opposes the Islamic state concept. Said a Malacca delegate: "We don't encounter any problems in our co-operation with DAP ... we don't really need DAP, but it is the DAP which needs us."

It is the deal with Parti Keadilan Nasional, in having to make way for the party launched in April in some of the 116 Muslim-majority parliamentary seats, that appears to cause some anxiety to sections of Pas.

In any case, with party president Datuk Fadzil Noor telling the muktamar from the outset to brace for a culture shock, it ended by embracing a new script. This came in the form of a proposal to open its doors to non-Muslims, to be accepted as "associate members" with a special dewan (wing) set up.

Party vice-president Hassan Shukri, head of the party's committee on constitutional amendments, said an aspect of the proposal was admittedly "sensitive" - giving "political right" to such non-Muslim members by fielding them as election candidates.

Although this can only materialise later - in several years' time, said an official - the idea was being floated with the nationwide polls possibly months away, with Pas stepping up efforts to woo the non-Muslim votes and claiming the support of many professionals.

Will non-Muslims warm up to the idea or shy away as they will not have voting rights? How will the party grassroots react? Is Pas experimenting? And possibly keeping an escapedoor just in case the idea backfires?

Hassan Shukri clarified a few things during the muktamar. Firstly, this is not meant merely as an election strategy. Instead, it is designed towards closer integration.

Secondly, it is at a very initial stage having to be deliberated by, first, Hassan Shukri's committee, then the central working committee, later by the powerful Majlis Syura Ulamak headed by Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, and finally a special muktamar.

Thirdly, there is nothing new in this idea which was first broached way back in 1962. "We revived this before the (Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim issue

cropped up," said Mustaffa Ali, the other Pas vice-president, in a telephone interview from Terengganu.

Since then, the idea has triggered responses, with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi describing the no-voting right concept, as "discriminatory".

"Before commenting, all observers will have to wait for the final decision," said Mahfuz. Mustaffa thought the no-voting right concept sensible. He said a communist party, for instance, could not be expected to accept non-communists in policy-making bodies, but did not rule out the possibility of Pas non-Muslim election candidates being invited to high-level meetings.

With change prevalent (Pas is not adverse to changes in strategies, said Mustaffa), Pas is also in the midst of some other far-reaching adjustments.

For instance, party leaders were evidently encouraged by the victory of Pas speaker Datuk Dr Hassan Ali, 51, in the CWC polls. Hassan Ali, who has been a high-profile new recruit, received the fourth highest number of votes.

Hassan Ali also wore baju Melayu with songkok to the muktamar against the traditional turban or white skull cap, and noted that there was no sign he was being alienated.

Is this about adjusting the party's public image? Mahfuz said the entry of many new members already represented a change.

Some Pas supporters also tend to be emotional and get carried away in their attacks on personalities. Will this also change?

Walking up the stairs to the Pas office in Alor Star, this advice tends to catch the eye among the many pronouncements on the notice board:

(A rough translation) "Prove (your) anger towards (Prime Minister Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) and BN leaders with your hand and don't vote for the BN."

(END)