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Pas tries to portray new phase at opening of 45th Muktamar

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PAS boasts of a thriving network of work brigades, called unit amal. Baling in Kedah alone has 500 diligent youngsters as members who perform an array of tasks like directing traffic through congested lanes to the ubiquitous Pas ceramah.

They are most famously credited within the party, for the highly-visible Pas flags. Some Pas flags shoot up to the sky from tall trees. "We think nothing about climbing a 15 metre-tree to put up the flags," said a youngster from Kedah.

This is the kind of voluntarism that Pas prides itself in. "When Pas members get ready to attend a ceramah," its permanent chairman regaled a new cast at Pas's 45th Muktamar yesterday: "Their wives ask how much money are they contributing to the party's coffers."

Posts and responsibilities are about serving the party and the religion, and any different strands of opinion are kept within party circles.

"And ultimately party members support the Islamic State concept ... even elections are just stopovers," said a senior party official.

At the same time, many in the party feel Pas is on the verge of something big, which, to some, means change is inevitable.

There is also an "unprecedented" number of new members, and Pas is cautiously attempting another electoral alliance, mindful that members are still bitter at how the pact with Parti Melayu Semangat 46 finally turned sour.

This was the backdrop to a major speech yesterday by party president Datuk Fadzil Noor at the opening of its 45th muktamar.

With Pas claiming to have signed up 100,000 new members in the last 10 months including scores of professionals, Fadzil told members to brace themselves for a possible culture shock.

Attempts to get Pas leaders to go into specifics failed. "It is common for leaders of political leaders to stress the need for consolidation. (Prime Minister) Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad does that in Umno, too," said a new recruit, and seen by some as a catalyst for change in the party, Datuk Dr Hassan Ali.

This motivational expert has been in the thick of things since joining Pas six months ago.

Are there worries about not being able to maintain the fabric of the party, amid the infusion of newcomers? Fadzil said his remarks were rooted in a possible electoral alliance. "We have to explain this to the members," said Fadzil.

While Pas members wanted the party to lead any coalition, Fadzil said it was too early to discuss who would be prime minister if this new alliance won.

Already, the influential Dewan Ulama (council of theologians) in the party, last night passed a resolution calling on Pas to ensure any alliance would not be at the expense of Pas struggles.

Fadzil, on his part, told Pas delegates their views on "Pas involvement in the new political arrangements" were welcome, but party leadership's final decision shall prevail. How will the muktamar proper react? "We will wait and see," said a party official.

In the meantime, examples of what is possibly a new phase in Pas abound, even at the muktamar opening, which kicked off in a boisterous ambience. And an adjusted cast.

Hassan, who has been bringing the Pas message to professionals and the Chinese community, was there for the first time. Completing the different cast were DAP's Dr Tan Seng Giaw (Kepong MP); top brass of the Parti Keadilan Nasional led by Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail; Parti Rakyat Malaysia president Dr Syed Hussin Ali; the normal non-governmental organisation personalities; and diplomats.

"There is an attempt (by Pas) to look at the nation as a whole, as a multi-racial society," said Tan, downplaying the absence of party strongman, Lim Kit Siang.

The reality, said Tan, was that no single Opposition party was in the position to deny Barisan Nasional the two-thirds majority on its own.

Pas has set its sights on something bigger, though, - forming the next Government, which is why Hassan and the rest are actively engaging professionals and the Chinese.

(Hassan and Lim met the Chinese community in Klang last night). Also, for a moment or two, political observers could have read something in the fact that some Pas delegates wore baju Melayu with black songkok.

Will this different persona against the traditional white skull-cap and turban appeal to a wider section of the society?

None of the Pas leaders was prepared to venture into this. Some see it as trivial. "Do you think baju Melayu with songkok is too Umno?" asked Fadzil who said Pas was flexible about appearance.

To Hassan, the black songkok amid a sea of white skull-caps signifies the infusion of new generation of Pas members. "And this appearance is well accepted by the party," said Hassan who pointed out that his baju Melayu with songkok did not raise eyebrows.

"It is the struggle which is paramount," he said. Some observers were reminiscing yesterday, saying during the time of Datuk Asri Muda, songkok was the norm. This changed with the ascendancy of the ulama in Pas.

But what about now?

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