

Inside the new politics

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KUALA TERENGGANU

The government is worried by the growth of Islamic fundamentalism

IN TERENGGANU, a rather remote state in north-eastern Malaysia, a change is taking place in politics that might mark a turning-point for the whole country. Or then it might not. What is certain is that there is a growing uncertainty among Malaysians about the way they are governed.

Back in November, the general election had at first seemed to leave the rock of Mohamad Mahathir's government pretty well undisturbed. There had been some losses, put down as inevitable after his 18 years in power. But his coalition retained more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament. The losses could be blamed on a protest vote against the treatment of Anwar Ibrahim, a popular former deputy prime minister who was beaten after being arrested. Memories would fade, indignation would pass. Since then there has been a closer and, for the government, alarming examination of the losses and their consequences.

In the north of the country, where the Malay vote is concentrated, Dr Mahathir's previously adoring supporters abandoned him in great numbers and gave their support to opposition candidates, notably those of an Islamist party, PAS. The Islamists took control of Terengganu. With Kelantan, a state that PAS already ruled, they are now in political control of the whole of the northeast of peninsular Malaysia, and can count on considerable support in neighbouring states. It is clear that Dr Mahathir did so well in November only because the Chinese, a substantial minority in Malaysia, decided, for the present, to continue to support him.

For the past few weeks, the government's anxiety about its seemingly crumbling support has been concentrated on a by-election in Sanggang. This has always been a safe seat for Dr Mahathir's party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and in ordinary times a by-election would hardly have been noticed. This time UMNO treated the poll as a national event, bringing in party workers from all over Malaysia. Sanggang, it was pointed out, is in the state of Pahang, next door to dreaded Terengganu. It had to be held: Malaysia's whole way of life was at stake. UMNO chose as its candidate a guardian of the local mosque to fight the PAS candidate, a lawyer. On April 1st, the UMNO man duly won.

Politics being what it is, UMNO claimed a famous victory, but in



retrospect Sanggang's brief fame is more likely to be seen as an indication of UMNO's anxiety. It has done nothing to ease the fear that the Anwar protest may be a symptom of Malays' general disenchantment with a government associated with injustice; that Malaysia could be in the grip of what Tolstoy called the march of history, and UMNO can do little about it. President Suharto was deposed almost overnight after 32 years of unchallenged power in Indonesia. Malaysia, it is noted uneasily, became independent a little over 40 years ago and has been run by UMNO ever since. Fear needs little logic.

Malaysia is formally an Islamic state, but some Islamic priests say that the government is secular. From the viewpoint of Terengganu, the government in Kuala Lumpur looks distant and greedy. The capital seen on television is a counterfeit of a modern western city, flashy and materialistic. Women are casual about covering their heads in public, as is usual in Terengganu and elsewhere in the north. The government is furious at being called secular. The other day a minister said it was PAS that was un-Islamic because the party sought to deprive its followers of "worldly satisfaction", which he claimed was an Islamic tenet.

Terengganu's new Islamic state govern-

ment is unperturbed by such attacks. PAS un-Islamic? Is the federal government going mad? In passing, it points out that since coming to power it has in fact given its employees the worldly satisfaction of a five-day week. More goodies could be on the way if it can get a bigger share of the royalties from the oil and gas deposits that lie off the Terengganu coast. At present it gets 5%. But the federal government may not be in a giving mood. Terengganu already looks like an advertisement for PAS rule.

It is being guided by the experience of Kelantan, three hours away by an indifferent road (blamed on an uncaring federal government), where PAS has been in power since 1990, and last November increased its vote. In Kelantan, gambling has been banned, as has karaoke, because it is associated with rowdyism. Alcohol is discouraged but tolerated in non-Muslim establishments. Friday is a holiday and Sunday a working day, which can be awkward for Christian-run businesses, but seems to be manageable. People say the state government is honest, which is not a compliment much heard elsewhere in Malaysia.

Critics of the way Kelantan and Terengganu are run say that the Islamists are just pretending to be tolerant, and that PAS longs to introduce *sharia* law with its awful punishments. Perhaps, perhaps not. UMNO would say that, anyway. Both UMNO and PAS have their eyes on Malaysia's ethnic-Chinese (26%) and Indian (7%) populations. Both groups are quiet-lifers and have tended to support UMNO. But they resent UMNO's policy of favouring Malays in education and for government jobs. The Chinese, the backbone of Malaysian business, may feel they can do better now that UMNO needs them more. PAS will hope that the Chinese and Indians will be attracted by the offer of honest government, strict but tolerant.

All this is taking place against the impending retirement of Dr Mahathir, who has said that this is his last term as prime minister. He may change his mind, and he has

swiftly disposed of plans by some critics to dump him as party leader in UMNO's party elections in May. He believes he is irreplaceable, and perhaps he is right. Only the doctor could have got away with telling the Malays that they were inherently lazy and had to mend their ways. Credit for Malaysia's undoubted economic success belongs to him, and he fears an inexperienced hand could ruin it.

Abdul Hadi Awang, the new chief minister of Terengganu, had the temerity to say recently that he had a vision of PAS and like-minded parties running the federal government. Then, the grateful pilgrim, he flew to Mecca.