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Rallying the troops

Abdul Razak Abu Chik

AFTER a weekend of debates, glad-hand back-slapping, and plenty of rhetoric suffused with a little soul-searching, Parti Islam se-Malaysia or Pas has pronounced that it is readying itself to face the next general election. As that may be more than four years' away, the rallying call may appear to be a bit premature to all but the most eager-beaver party activist.

This long-term planning and foresight, however, typifies the new assertiveness of a party that believes it is on a roll and wants to cash in on its greater acceptance and 'electability' among the people. In essence, that was the message sent by party president Datuk Fadzil Noor at the conclusion of Pas' 46th muktamar or general assembly held on June 2-5 in Kuala Terengganu.

Things did not appear to be going Pas' way at the outset. It was handicapped in that so soon after the recent general elections and the far more noisy Umno jamboree in May, interest in 'party politicking' had subsided when the time came for its gathering of the faithful. The 'turtle state' may have been the logical choice for the four-day assembly in recognition of its feat in returning a Pas-led government at the polls. But the remoteness of Kuala Terengganu compared to Taman Melewar in Gombak, Selangor, the venue for previous assemblies, meant that some urgency was lost in the coverage even though the local press did turn up in reasonable force.

No one but the most committed party member could have concluded that the plodding nature of the proceedings during this muktamar had endeared the 50-year-old party to the vast majority of the electorate. This is significant as it was widely assumed that top of the agenda for discussion was the issue of opening up the party membership to non-Muslims. In the event, this was not discussed. Fadzil said non-Muslims had a role to play and this was best done in the broader alliance in the shape of the Barisan Alternatif (BA).

Rather incongruously, it was the party's feminine flank that raised the much-needed frisson of excitement. The exotically-named Dr Lo' Lo' Ghazali spoke her mind on the need for material forms of recognition for the important role played by women in Pas (the name Lo' Lo' appears in the surah Ar-rahman in the Quran, and rhymes with look, which means pearl in Arabic.) The physician, who runs a clinic in Taman Melawati, Selangor, asked the party hierarchy why, throughout the assembly, there was not a single female party official seated on the stage.

The depth of her concern can be gauged from her own admission that she was aware that the media would latch on to her speech and play up the issue. She has been famously quoted as saying, 'Kita tengok pemimpin Pas di atas sana yang segak-segak tapi apa yang dah jadi dengan kami (Muslimat)... Mengapa kami dipinggirkan... Kalau media nak main isu ini biarlah, tapi saya nak sebut juga.' (We see Pas leaders on stage looking smart but what of us women... Why are we marginalised... If the media wishes to play up this issue, so be it, but I want to say my piece.) Dr Lo' Lo' speaks with some authority as she is a member of the party's central working committee.

There is a certain edge to her assertiveness which the party would do well to address. She pointed out that the party hierarchy did not find it in any way objectionable to have a woman in the person of Keadilan

President Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah sharing the stage in opposition rallies. She, therefore, urged the party hierarchy to allow women members to play a more proactive role, including being put up as candidates in general elections.

Deputy Pas president and Terengganu Menteri Besar Abdul Hadi Awang was firm in his advice to the Dewan Muslimat (the Women's wing). In an obvious reference to a vocal Islamic group comprising professional women in this country, Hadi said the Dewan Muslimat should not be similarly swayed and be cast adrift from the true religious path. He warned them not to be so bold as to claim that Quranic teachings and traditions of the prophet were no longer relevant in this day and age.

Party president Fadzil was more conciliatory. Asked whether the party had credible female candidates to be fielded, he replied, 'We have and we will make the choice when the time comes.' Others in the Pas hierarchy appeared to be making the right noises to appease the Dewan Muslimat. Deputy Permanent chairman and Kelantan state assembly speaker Wan Abdul Rahim Wan Abdullah believed that women in Pas should be allowed to contest. They should also be given a 'leg up' by being granted the opportunity to contest 'safe' seats. This is not entirely without precedent as Pas did have a lone woman MP in the late Khadijah Sidek from Terengganu late in the 1960s.

The ball has been tossed back in the Dewan Muslimat's court as Fadzil, pressed on the matter, retorted equivocally, 'We will study the matter and if the Dewan Muslimat really wants this, they should send a memorandum to the party leadership.'

The Barisan Nasional was quick to cash in on this perceived 'feminine frailty'. It came at a very opportune time just as campaigning for the Teluk Kemang parliamentary by-election was at its zenith. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has gone so far as to brand the party as deceitful in not fielding women candidates in elections. 'This is deceit as on the one hand, women cannot be fielded in elections, but on the other hand, they are being used to secure support for male candidates.'

Another rallying call for members was the threat of having to drop 'Islam' from its party name by legislation. The Dewan Muslimat rose to the occasion with speaker after speaker offering the 'ultimate sacrifice' (syahid) to see that this threat did not materialise. For the moment, they can carry on with the business of living as Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had said in Kota Baru, a day after the muktamar's conclusion, that the government has yet to decide on the matter.

An interesting development in this muktamar was the savvy confidence of Pas' youth wing, the Dewan Pemuda. Led by Mahfuz Omar, the youth wing has taken upon itself the task of swaying the estimated two million voters from among the electorate who are deemed ripe for 'conversion' to the cause. It can call on the support of a fresh crop of university graduates whose commitment is unquestioned.

This band of party activists works quietly behind the scenes to build up grassroots support for Pas. Many eschew the traditional jubah (robes) and serban (turban) worn by the older generation for everyday work togs - fashionable professional attire which attracts rather than alienates support and sympathy. Gone are unkempt beards to be replaced by neatly-trimmed facial hair, 'designer label-like' gear and the 'altered wheels' favoured by the young. They have the benefit of a traditional early Islamic education together with conventional tertiary methods which makes most of them trilingual - they flit easily from Malay and English to Arabic. Away from the muktamar many would not seem out of place strolling among the lunchtime crowd in trendy Bintang Walk or hip KLCC.

Their effort will be crucial if Pas is to win the next general election. At the conclusion of the muktamar Fadzil set them the task of increasing the party membership from 800,000 currently to one million. In the meantime, the `sisterly squeak' from the just-concluded 46th muktamar alone shows there is at least one crease that needs to be ironed out in the next four years if victory is to become anywhere near reality.

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