

MALAYSIA

# Lost Ground

*The rise of the Islamic opposition may have been stunted by world events and messy politics*

*FERRIS 21 3 2002*

By S. Jayasankaran/KUALA LUMPUR

**FOLLOWING THE 1998 OUSTER** of Deputy Premier Anwar Ibrahim, a bumper sticker began appearing on cars throughout urban peninsular Malaysia, reflecting a shift in political allegiances. *Dulu Umno, Sekarang Pas*, the slogan read: "Previously Umno, Now Pas."

Today, with the declining fortunes of Pas, the Islamic Party of Malaysia, in opposition to the dominant United Malays National Organization, or Umno, a different message could well start appearing: "Previously Pas, Now No Longer."

Hatta Ramli, a medical doctor by training who is political secretary to Pas President Fadzil Noor, gives a simple explanation for the party's descent: The government has effectively banned the large political rallies known as *ceramah* that were the party's "main channel of communication with the public," says Hatta.

These rallies were vital for opposition parties with little or no access to the pro-government mainstream media. Pas is especially vulnerable because its huge daily *ceramah* were key to its fund-raising. It has now been confined to smaller rallies within its own premises, party officials say.

But there's more to Pas's decline. Most significant is a backlash against Islamic groups after the September 11 terror attacks in the United States, and the uncovering of alleged militant Muslim groups in Malaysia with possible links to terrorist Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network.

Pas's decline could mark a turning point in Malaysian politics. The party is the only significant threat to Umno's grip on power in the ruling National Front coalition, unbroken since independence in 1957. Add a stockmarket rally amid a nascent economic recovery, and the front is so strong now that Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad could choose to call a snap general election in 2003, a year ahead of schedule.

In the meantime, the government has seized on the post-September 11 backlash to demonize Pas as a party of militant extremists. Eight of the 12 alleged militants first arrested last year had been Pas members. Pas's own actions haven't helped: After the U.S. began its attacks on Afghanistan, several Pas leaders called for a holy war against America.

Other party leaders tried to undo the damage, saying that the party did not advocate violence. Their protests may be falling on deaf ears. Opposition leaders privately admit that Malaysia's non-Muslims, many of whom had voted against the government in the 1999 general election, have swung away from the Pas-dominated opposition. Malaysia comprises 63% indigenous bumiputras, who are mainly Muslim Malays, 30% Chinese and 7% Indians.

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You can't ride on the issue forever"**

CHANDRA MUZAFFAR, SOCIOLOGIST

Pas's steadfast desire to set up a purist Islamic state in Malaysia makes it easier for the government to cast it in a negative light. During a February by-election in northwestern Perlis state, Malaysia's two state-run television stations broadcast footage of the Taliban's austere rule in Afghanistan. The bad publicity the Taliban gave Islamic governance may have done the trick, as the election results gave the National Front an expanded majority.

If fear of militancy affects Pas's standing among non-Muslims, the declining influence of the Anwar controversy threatens its position among Malays. The perceived oppression in the sacking and imprisonment of Anwar was one of Pas's biggest selling points. But the effect may be fading. "Anwar is far less significant than he was three-and-a-half years ago," says sociologist Chandra Muzaffar, a former deputy president of Anwar's Keadilan party. "And you can't ride on the issue forever."

After the 1999 general election, the belief that Pas would become more moderate over time led even Umno politicians to begin talking about the evolution of a two-party system in Malaysia. Political analysts now dismiss the possibility, suggesting that the National Front seems set to rule indefinitely. Indeed, the opposition coalition of four parties led by Pas has broken up over the party's refusal to abandon its plans for an Islamic state.

Pas still remains strong in Kelantan and Terengganu, the two states it still rules. "Yes, I'd say Pas is on the defensive," says Zulkifli Alwi, Umno's executive secretary, "but it's premature to write them off." ■