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A DEATH HURTS THE ISLAMIC OPPOSITION

For the already battered opposition, the death on June 23 of Fadzil Noor, Malaysia's opposition leader and the president of the Islamic Party, or Pas, could mark a body blow to its hopes of denting the ruling National Front coalition in the next general elections.

Fadzil, 65, came across as a moderate in a party filled with hardline clerics, and often acted as a bridge between Pas, which espouses an Islamic state in Malaysia, and its more secular allies in opposition. His moderate face played a part in prompting many non-Malays to vote for the Pas-dominated opposition alliance in the 1999 general election.

In contrast, his putative successor, Abdul Hadi Awang, 54, who is currently Pas's deputy president, is burly and bearded, a turbaned cleric with piercing eyes who eschews Malay or Western dress for Arab robes. Hadi led the party's push for *hudud* law, which prescribes death by stoning for adultery and hand amputation for theft.

In short, Hadi makes a great many people uncomfortable. What's more, his image as a conservative Islamic leader may have become a political liability since the September 11 terror attacks in the United States.

"Our chances weren't getting any better," laments a senior member of the opposition Keadilan party, which is still in a formal alliance with Pas. "But if Hadi becomes the Pas chief, they'll vaporize by the day." (The opposition alliance now comprises only three parties: Pas, Keadilan and the small People's Party.)

Former Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam thinks that Hadi, by scaring away moderate Muslims, could actually help

its arch-rival, the United Malays National Organization, once Abdullah Ahmad Badawi becomes premier. "Abdullah may portray himself as a Malay nationalist but he's got Islamic credentials," says Musa. "It will attract a lot of Malays back to Umno."

Moreover, Hadi, unlike the late Fadzil, is confrontational when it comes to relations with Umno. In a now-famous sermon in the early 1980s he declared that Umno Malays were infidels because, among other things, they worked with non-believers.

The memory of this sermon does not help when Pas, which rules two states, needs to open doors with the Umno-dominated federal government. In the mid-May opening of a petroleum complex in Terengganu state, where Hadi is chief minister, guest-of-honour Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad pointedly snubbed him. That would not have happened with Fadzil.

Even so, Hadi's regular Friday sermons in the Terengganu hamlet of Rusila draw large crowds who venerate him as an Islamic scholar. But the unspoken worry among some opposition supporters is whether his brand of uncompromising Islam will radicalize the party, dooming it for ever to Malaysia's fringes.

As if to pass on the message, the eulogies to Fadzil were laudatory. Even Mahathir joined in the chorus. Fadzil would have appreciated the irony. Two months before his death he recalled that Mahathir, who is also from Kedah state, was his family doctor before the two men entered politics. "Mahathir was a good doctor then," quipped Fadzil. "And he should return to practice."