

MALAYSIA

Fertile Ground

The ruling party and its leader-in-waiting win back converts in the Malay heartland

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By S. Jayasankaran/PENDANG, KEDAH

MALAYSIA'S RELIGIOUS opposition wants to turn the moderate, multi-racial Southeast Asian country into a hardline Islamic state. Earlier this month, the opposition Islamic Party, or Pas, approved plans for strict *hudud* laws that prescribe amputation for theft and stoning to death for apostate Muslims in opposition-controlled Terengganu state.

But Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has vowed that the federal government won't allow the strict Islamic penal code to be enforced. The premier has called the *hudud* laws "cruel and unjust" and has been blunt about the shortcomings of the conservative clerics. In response, Pas has accused Mahathir of being "un-Islamic." Even members of his own political party privately admit that his statements can be offensive to many Muslims who think that the clerics should be respected and that the *hudud* laws represent the laws of God.

Soon the United Malays National Organization (Umno), the dominant party in the ruling coalition, will be looking to Mahathir's chosen successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, to stem the fundamentalist tide. Abdullah's pedigree should help woo Muslim voters to the Islamic centre after he takes the helm when Mahathir gives up power in October 2003. Few Pas leaders would dare attack Abdullah's religious credentials. The deputy premier will become Malaysia's first leader with

a degree in religious studies and comes from a long line of highly respected Islamic scholars.

The premier-in-waiting is also proving to be an astute politician and diplomat. He has avoided becoming entangled in the *hudud* controversy by stating that Malaysia is "not ready" for a strict Islamic penal code. And in the first electoral contests since the terrorist attacks on September 11, Abdullah claimed victory after Umno narrowed support for Pas and won back converts to Mahathir's more moderate brand of Islam.

In two by-elections in the Malay heartland—in Mahathir's home state of Kedah—the parties fought over state assembly and parliamentary seats that were vacated by the death in June of Fadzil Noor, a leader of Pas who was considered a moderate. In the mainly rural constituency of Pendang, Umno wrested back a parliamentary seat. And while the ruling party failed to take back the Anak Bukit seat for Kedah's state legislature, Pas held on to it with a reduced majority.

GAINING GROUND

The results may have been split. But they still can be viewed as a victory for the ruling party, underscoring that the fundamentalists have lost some support since 1999, when they made strong inroads due to anger over the firing and jailing of Mahathir's deputy, Anwar Ibrahim.

Many Malays still feel disquiet over Anwar's treatment. But their anger has waned. Anwar wasn't even an issue in the Pendang election, despite the fact that Malaysia's highest court rejected the former deputy premier's final appeal against a conviction and six-year prison sentence for corruption on July 10, the very day that campaigning kicked off in the state.

Signs of Abdullah's tact emerged during the elections when he visited Pondok Haji Abdul Aziz, one of the most influential religious schools in Pendang. The school was founded by Abdul Aziz, a colleague of Abdullah's late father, and is being run by Abdul Aziz's grandson, a staunch Pas supporter. The school has become a fertile breeding ground for recruits for Pas and Umno politicians are not welcome there. But Abdullah deftly sidestepped the controversy by inviting Abdul Aziz for lunch. "It went down very well with the Malays," says Kadir Jasin, a former newspaper editor from Pendang. "Abdullah has a better link to the Islamic traditionalists."

Abdullah may bring a softer touch in dealing with the religious divide, but he is an untested leader, and speculation about the dynamics of his administration-to-be is rife. He is being scrutinized for clues to his political leanings, leadership style, possible business links and which corporate chiefs he may nurture. Foreign investors and the business community will be watching him closely in the months leading up to the transition of power next year.

For all his political skills, Abdullah's economic acumen is less clear. On July 2, he held an informal meeting with 14 heads of international investment banks but steered clear of discussing economic or financial issues, according to one observer. "He came across as a nice guy, almost patrician," he says. "But he seemed reluctant to talk economics and when pressed the questions were fielded by his [financial] adviser." ■