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Foiling the Malay Taliban

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TWENTY-FOUR years ago, the religio-political Pas was badly beaten in its traditional contest with Umno. Mortified in Kelantan and Terengganu, the party moved to concentrate on Kedah where it believed it had a chance of forming the State Government. Pas was rebuffed, winning only seven of the 26 State Assembly seats.

In the 1978 general election Pas, which had just left the BN Government coalition after joining it in 1974, won only five parliamentary seats. Today it has 26 MPs, a notable achievement, and 12 State seats in Kedah, denying the BN its traditional two-thirds majority in 1999, and again when it retained the Anak Bukit by-election last Thursday.

Three years ago, Pas regained Terengganu where it once formed the Government from 1959 to 1961. Pas now aspires to capture Kedah in the next election.

Pas, since its formation in 1951, has consistently and unequivocally stated that its sole aim is the creation of an Islamic theocratic state. The fact that Malays only form 55 per cent of the population has never interfered with its resolve.

The results of the twin by-elections in Anak Bukit and Pendang show Pas' political threat is here to stay, confirming what I have repeatedly said and written since this column's debut.

Pas believes in manifest destiny: the doctrine that it is its duty and fate to rule this country because Allah has so willed it! This view is unequivocally stated and aired in all Pas ceramah, campaigns and official bulletins and its organ Harakah. And it is entrenched in the party constitution.

The outcome in Anak Bukit and Pendang has acquired greater significance than ever before. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, unless the people become wiser, they may end up with a Government lacking in wisdom (read Pas).

Once Malaysians thought the Pas threat was essentially political, but the farsighted among us must now see Pas' fanatic religio-political agenda in the context of the present perceived Western bias against the Muslims and the excessively pro-Israeli Anglo-American policy on the Middle East problem.

The Malays object to Americans and Europeans drawing links between Islam and terrorism. Pas' rhetoric resonated during last week's by-elections and resonates today.

Sept 11 and the global economy may be relevant for non-Malays and urbanites but they are not in the Malay heartland. Here, Pas' interpretation of the Holy Quran is what matters. Granted, the Government has done a lot for Islam, but to Pas and its supporters nothing is enough until its brand of Islam becomes the law and way of life, and they police it.

Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, Pas' acting president and Menteri Besar of Terengganu, hardline cleric and hudud personified, has reiterated, after Anak Bukit and Pendang, that his and his party's mission is to introduce "God's laws" in Malaysia. He said non-Muslims would not be forced to embrace "God's laws" or the syariah edicts until they understood the ordinances.

Pas is waging a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the other Malaysians.

Pendang/Anak Bukit demonstrated that Islam, even in the manipulative hands of Pas, remains a powerful force in Malay politics. Actually, it always was. But in the past, it was an unspoken tenet, integral to Malayness and not distinct from it. Pas, in the 1980s, after its unhappy co-habitation with Umno, decided that its survival lay in separating the Islamic from the Malay.

Radicalised Young Turks inspired by the Iranian revolution began to take it as far away from Umno as possible. That period, therefore, saw the re-intensification of the kafir mengkafir and the "two imams" issues, first raised in the 1959 general election.

Pas' abortive stay in the Barisan Nasional and the 1978 election results showed that the more it looked like Umno, the more the Malay nationalist party would gain at its expense.

So the younger Pas leaders deposed the old guard, whom they regarded as Umno lookalikes. Perhaps unconsciously, Umno, the undisputed holder of the Malay centre, had pushed Pas to the extreme.

It was in the interest of Pas' ascendant theocrats, all educated in the Middle East, to make politics strictly black and white - you are either with us or against us, with Islam or against it.

Not long after Hadi began to build his bastion in Kampung Rusila, a few astute Umno leaders saw the makings of a threat. Dr Mahathir, for one, took the threat seriously. They began a gradual but half-hearted process of "Islamisation".

It was half-hearted because most of the Umno rank and file were unconvinced. They thought that Umno represented a resilient majority, that it would be folly to "compete" or try to "out-Islamise" Pas.

By pushing Pas to the extreme, they believed that it would eventually be pushed in extremis. They seemed to be right, all the way up to the 1999 general election. They may still be right today, but the scenario has changed.

Umno's grip on the centre is not as firm as it used to be. Unless the party can merge nationalism, modernism and liberalism with a strong Islamic grounding, it could eventually lose out. Pas has carved a position in the Malay psyche where it can capitalise mightily on disaffection with Umno.

Umno represents Islam's modern and tolerant face and it is in tough competition with Pas' version of the religion.

Hadi asserted: "We are true fundamentalists who are pure, we are serious, not horsing around, on our Islam." I believe Pas plans to eventually extend the syariah laws to cover non-Muslims.

It depends who you read: Some believe Malay support for Pas has eroded because creating a purist Islamic theocratic state has sparked fears among Malays who have for nearly five centuries been practising a gentle form of Islam.

A rival newspaper's columnist stated that Umno did not dent Pas' support base in the by-elections. The BN won Pendang because the disaffected fence-sitters voted for it only after a Herculean effort at bringing voters to the polls.

Be that as it may, one thing is clear: it is going to be a long-drawn-out and hard-fought battle between the forces of moderation and ultra-conservatism. The moderate Malays, with the support of non-Malays, are cognisant of the political consequences for Malaysia should Pas achieve its aim.

Can Pas be contained? Yes, it can but it's bound to be hard work. No matter how great the task, middle Malaysia must start articulating its point of view with savvy, passion and drive.

Umno must move forward with ardour from Pendang. Pas remains and will be

the only real threat in the next general election, the one after that, and in years to come, unless its momentum is stopped. It does seem Umno is being punished for its own success.

The choice for the Malays now is easier, and for the non-Malays who form about 40 per cent of the electorate, it's a no-brainer.

Pendang has shown the way. It was an important victory, even if the margin was only 283 votes. It is not too late to change tactics to overcome the Pas threat and avert a Malay Afghanistan.