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Pas must show it is true to democracy

PAS, according to the Prime Minister, has a right to exist. The country's democratic framework ensures it a place and a role. Any rumours to the contrary would be the machinations of the party itself.

Any suggestion that the ruling party might be "gunning them down" would benefit only Pas, which is currently facing a waning of public support caused by its openly exclusivist position made manifest by its insistence on denying Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's assertion that Malaysia is already an Islamic state. The party is to some extent being tarnished with the Muslim extremist-terrorist brush, especially given the detention of the son of the party's spiritual leader or Mursyidul Am. Therefore, more than any other party it is Pas that would dearly love to have the government admit that its existence is no longer convenient.

Such an admission will not be forthcoming for as long as Pas commits itself, in words and deeds, to democracy. Hence, the importance of it maintaining a manifesto that is absolutely inclusivist in spite of the religio-cultural pluralism of the electorate.

The dilemma, then, is not with the ruling party. Rather, it is Pas that must come clean with its notion of an Islamic state before the electorate can appreciate the extent of its democratic commitment. It must be explicit about such important issues as citizenship status for non-Muslims: Are all Malaysians equal or are non-Muslims second-class citizens? It must make known the legal position of non-Muslims: Will they be subject to Islamic laws without cognisance of their religious beliefs? It must declare its tolerance, if not acceptance, of the pluralist nature of democracy: Will non-Muslim political parties be part of the electoral process?

By considering the kharaj tax on non-Muslims soon after the 1999 general election, for example, Pas has shown a willingness to fiddle with the principle of equality that is the bedrock of all democracies.

Until its ideological leanings become an incontrovertible fact of public knowledge, voters must remain wary. To the democrats among us there can be no compromising those principles that have fashioned our society thus far.

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