

Let Us Learn

The *premier's efforts to cut back on religious education have become divisive and political*

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By Leslie Lopez/KUALA LUMPUR

PUBLIC RESENTMENT over a move by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to halt state funding of religious schools-part of an initiative to get Islam out of the educational mainstream-has not gone unnoticed. The opposition Islamic party, Parti Islam Se Malaysia, or Pas, has seized on the issue in an effort to boost its popular standing among the predominantly Muslim ethnic Malays who account for about 60% of the population.

Government leaders argue that religious schools nurture Islamic extremism, teach a stilted brand of Islam peppered with anti-government themes and paint Mahathir as hostile to the faith. Yet Islamic schools remain popular among Malay parents who see the government's own schools as too secular.

"We think the government has underestimated the potential impact," says Syed Azman Syed Ahmad, a Pas member of parliament. "Religious schools are part of the Malay heritage and the view on the ground is that this is not just against Islam but against the Malays."

But officials in Mahathir's National Front coalition government don't seem worried. In fact, they suggest that by

diminishing the role of religion in schools they will weaken the Islamic opposition.

The government announced it had halted funding in February. If religious influence isn't mitigated in religious schools now, "Pas will thrive," says Musa Hitam, former deputy prime minister and a highly respected elder in Mahathir's party the United Malays National Organization, or Umno, which leads the governing coalition.

Mohamed Rahmat, secretary general of the National Front and a senior Umno member, insists the government won't roll back its plans to reform the place of religion in all schools, despite a possible backlash among voters. "This is something that we have to carry out. Pas and the rest [of the opposition] will make this into an election issue, but it is not one that will cost us the next elections," says Mohamed, referring to the coming national elections, which must be held before the end of 2004.

But Mohamed concedes that, because of established voter support for Pas and the added conflict over religious education, Umno will face serious problems in the Malay-dominated states such as Kedah and the two opposition-controlled states, Kelantan and Terengganu. That's where the controversy is stoking the most debate, and it is there that Pas and several non-governmental groups are exploiting the issue the most, drawing large numbers to political gatherings where Mahathir's moves are denounced as an assault against Islam.

Mahathir's original plan was to simply shut down religious schools. That proved to be so unpopular that he and his party decided to withdraw funds instead. By seeking to strangle the schools financially, the government hopes Muslim parents will abandon them in favour of an education at national schools, which also provide religious classes. "We want to provide an alternative and that is to give them a chance to be absorbed into the national schools," Mahathir told Umno members at a briefing on Islamic schools in mid-February.

So far, however, private religious schools are holding their own. "The argument that religious schools breed militants and preach anti-government politics is wrong," says Azmi Hamid, leader of the recently established movement called Gegar, which is opposed to Kuala Lumpur's move to close religious schools. He argues that several prominent government figures such as Mahathir's own Islamic affairs adviser, Hamid Othman, were products of religious schools.

In Perak state, school principal Wan Ahmad Tarmizi Abdul Aziz remains adamant that religious schools such as his do not nurture extremism. "The government's argument to close our schools is without any foundation. The whole thing is very political," says Wan Ahmad, who runs the Al Mahad Umah school founded 13 years ago in the small town of Chemor.

Equipped with computer rooms, science labs and sporting facilities that cater to nearly 700 students on a modern 10-acre campus, Al Mahad has a record of producing secondary-school graduates with some of the best examination results in the country. Malaysia's Ministry of Education said last month that about 10% of students in religious schools have withdrawn and moved to government-run national schools following the Kuala Lumpur's decision to cut funding last month.

"Despite all the threats and use of the government machinery to scare the parents, only a small number have dropped out. The message clearly is that the parents and students aren't going to budge," says Wan Ahmad. He adds that his school, like several others, has already begun fund-raising campaigns to meet the shortfall.

There are currently 300,000 students who attend public and private religious schools full-time in peninsular Malaysia. Several states have seen an upsurge in the number of religious schools. In Perak, the number of religious schools has swelled to 689 from 151 in 1991. Their numbers have also swelled in the urban areas, making Kuala Lumpur's task of reining in these religious schools more complex.

OLD RIVALRY, NEW SPLIT

The controversy highlights a fresh division in the decades-old rivalry for political power between moderate and conservative Malay Muslims in this multi-ethnic, multi-religious country. Moderates, led by Umno, have dominated Malaysia's political landscape from the time of independence in 1957.

All that changed on September 11, 1998, when Mahathir's fired his heir apparent, prominent Muslim Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. Anwar's sacking and imprisonment triggered large-scale defections by moderates from Umno, and many party officials concede that Umno has yet to regain its lost ground.

Pas, and to a lesser extent the Anwar-backed Justice Party, as members of the three-party opposition coalition, have been the main beneficiaries, tilting the balance in the Malay heartland in favour of the conservatives. As a result, confrontations between moderates and conservatives have become more frequent, more noisy and more politically divisive.

This growing chasm is making it hard for the government to convince people their initiatives are anything but political. "Issues are getting politicized," laments one Umno cabinet minister. "We are finding it difficult to get our view across." ■