

MALAYSIA

The Islamic Challenge

An opposition party ups the ante in the battle for the hearts and minds of ethnic Malays with a plan for a fully fledged religious state

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By Leslie Lopez/KUALA LUMPUR

WHEN MALAYSIA'S OPPOSITION Parti Islam Se Malaysia, or Pas, announced plans recently to introduce *sharia*, or Islamic law, nationwide should it ever come to power, it complicated first-time voter James Wee's plans to cast his ballot against the ruling National Front coalition government in next year's parliamentary election. "These things scare me," says the ethnic-Chinese supplier of hardware materials, one of multi-faith Malaysia's large non-Muslim minority, which comprises almost 40% of the population.

But the pledge by Pas to enforce strict religious law—including Koran-decreed punishments such as amputation and flogging for convicted Muslim offenders—is music to the ears of Abdul Rahman Che Suh. "This is what the struggle of a Muslim is all about and Pas is the only party determined to deliver," says the 38-year-old ethnic Malay, who teaches at a religious school in Kelantan state.

The conflicting views reflect the hardening of positions over religion between non-Malays—mainly Malaysia's Chinese and Indian communities—and the politically dominant Malays. On the face of it, the furore over Pas's proposal to enact Islamic laws and eventually establish Malaysia as an Islamic state should help new Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's coalition government retain the crucial non-Muslim vote in next year's poll, widely expected in the first half of 2004.

But Pas's embrace of conservative Islam appeals to some ethnic Malays, especially young professionals, and spells trouble for Abdullah's United Malays National Organization, or Umno, the linchpin of the ruling coalition. Many Malaysian political analysts say that restoring Umno's clear-cut status as the country's strongest ethnic Malay party will be the biggest political challenge for Abdullah, who took over as premier and Umno president from Mahathir Mohamad last month.

"It is no secret that people are jaded with some of the older Umno leaders," says Azim Zabidi, a senior Umno official. "But the Malays haven't completely deserted us, and to get them back Umno must be rejuvenated, and people would like to see Abdullah bring in new faces and new ideas."

Umno's slippage in popularity began in late 1998 when Mahathir sacked his charismatic deputy prime minister,

Anwar Ibrahim, on the grounds of alleged corruption and sexual misconduct. Anwar, who was later convicted on the charges and jailed, claims that he was a victim of a conspiracy to prevent him from challenging Mahathir. Pas and a new Malay-based party of Anwar supporters known as Parti Keadilan allied to campaign against Umno in Malaysia's 1999 election, portraying Umno as a corrupt bastion of patronage and privilege for the ruling establishment.

Although Umno candidates won 70% of the constituencies they contested in the 1999 election, that was down sharply from almost 90% in the 1995 national polls, when Umno was at the peak of its popularity. And many of Umno's narrow victories were due to strong support from non-Malay, non-Muslim voters. Pas, on the other hand, won 27 of the 63 seats it contested in 1999, up from just seven seats the party secured in 1995. On an aggregate basis, some Umno officials privately acknowledge that about half of the total ethnic-Malay vote spurned Umno in favour of Pas, which now controls two of Malaysia's 13 state governments.

Malaysia's parliamentary democracy is currently subject to civil law, though *sharia* is enforced on some matters—for example, marriage and divorce—pertaining to Muslims. Pas has tried in the two states it governs, Kelantan and Terengganu, to replace secular criminal laws with Islamic strictures, despite the fact that this may be unconstitutional.