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Pas' Islamic agenda left the Malays cold

Sharon Nelson

PAS' strongest sales pitch, the Islamic state, has failed miserably to reach its mark. This may be because Malays are not ready for it, according to a survey, writes SHARON NELSON.

PAS' poor showing in the Malay belt throws up this question: are Muslims uncomfortable with the strident manner in which the conservative Islamic party pushed its Islamic state agenda?

In the run-up to the polls, Pas leaders argued that Muslims in Kedah, Perlis, Terengganu and Kelantan were ready for hudud. They even made it a central plank of their manifesto for the northern states.

The party, it seemed, was awash with self-assurance. Confident that it would add Kedah to its green necklace, Pas fielded several well-known ulama in the election. Last November, it also released its Islamic state document, the blueprint for how it would run the nation.

"The big thing that Pas was selling was the Islamic state," said Dr Maznah Mohamad, a social scientist with Universiti Sains Malaysia. But the sharp turnabout in votes means that a lot of people are not ready for it, she said.

This is despite the voting pattern in 1999. In that election, the party also used the Islamic state as a platform and managed to make deep inroads into BN territory.

"Now," said Maznah, "we can ask the question: was it the Anwar issue or the Islamic state?"

"It looks like it was more to do with the anger towards Umno over Anwar."

She also said that while people may not oppose Pas' Islamic state openly, the vote was their way of expressing reservations.

Certainly this was reflected in a nationwide survey conducted just before the dissolution of Parliament.

Commissioned by the New Straits Times and carried out by Universiti Utara Malaysia, the survey showed that a surprising 52.2 per cent Malaysians preferred the Prime Minister's vision of Islam over Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang's, which was backed by only 16.3 per cent.

This was abundantly clear with the near-clean sweep the BN had in Terengganu that saw Menteri Besar Hadi losing his Marang parliamentary seat.

"It means that the Islam being advocated by Pas has not struck roots in the Malay heartland," said political scientist Chandra Muzaffar of the result trend in the Malay belt.

Analysts also agree that Abdullah's gentler style of advocating modern Islam went a long way towards influencing votes.

The split among that Malay vote, so painfully recorded in the last election, has apparently been healed.

So how did Pas misread the situation so badly?

"It was a strategic mistake," said sociologist Professor Rahman Embong of Institut Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

The party may have been overconfident and failed to feel the undercurrents.

"Or if they did, they may have thought the undercurrents would not surface."

Over-confidence, he said, is an expression of incapacity to manage success and leads to alienation from the people.

He also cites the agenda raised by the new leadership as a major pull factor.

"Two decades of material progress have created opportunities and avenues for corruption.

"But here you have an agenda for change and good governance. It resonates with people because they have been feeling these things but they cannot articulate them or translate them into policy," said Rahman.

Though Pas once reflected the Malay identity of an earlier period, and anecdotally it seemed as if the strict doctrine had taken root, the election results clearly indicate otherwise.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's approach to Malay politics, Chandra said, is also firmly factored into the BN's success.

"His Islam is sensible, reasonable. Malays generally prefer this. They don't want dogma, they want to be a part of the contemporary world."

Like Maznah, Chandra believes that many of the votes cast in Pas' favour in 1999 were protest votes.

Former deputy prime minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam, had no difficulty pinpointing the reason for Pas' poor showing in the east coast states.

"It is definitely the Badawi Factor," he said.

"Here you have a Malay who has got so much credibility. He's very moderate in approach, religious, and has demonstrated the genuineness of his personality.

"It has touched hearts and minds that he is serious about boosting those areas which have been left out for so long - the areas of education and agriculture.

"It is a massive vote of confidence," said Musa about the recapture of Terengganu by BN and the acute swing in Kelantan.

"What needs to be done is also comparatively massive."

Kelantan, he said, has been left so far behind that its growth potential is "very exciting".

Musa said the results affirm his long-held belief that Malays are moderate in religion and aspire to development.

"I guess they must be saying that enough is enough. The fact that most of the good Kelantanese have migrated out of the State shows that they have had the privilege of development, and have probably influenced relatives and friends." Sociologist Dr Mansor Mohd Noor, who led the NST survey, says Kelantan politics is essentially pragmatic.

"This means that Nik Aziz can open a bridge in Pasir Mas with Tun Mahathir. Both sides can use the bridge and it doesn't affect anyone's piety," said Mansor who is from Kelantan.

But as analysts and columnists keep saying, the mandate - which is also a mandate for moderate Islam - is only the beginning.

"Undoubtedly," says Chandra, "more time will be needed to make changes to the education system and our approach to Islamic studies."

The "software changes" that Abdullah keeps talking about - including revamping religious studies - are poised to blossom richly.