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Pas eyeing to feed on fallout from Umno elections

By Brendan Pereira

ONE of the first icons that pops up when you visit the Harakah website these days is the one directing readers to Euro 2004 match reports.

In the weeks ahead, the people behind the print version of Pas' official newspaper may hurl decades of convention out the window and carry features on lifestyle and tourism.

Why this sudden change of editorial policy from a publication that devoted its ink almost entirely to politics, religion and a clinical dissection of the Barisan Nasional Government's policies?

For no other reason than the one that drives most decisions in newsrooms around the world - to give readers what they want and arrest a fall in sales.

It is also a sign of the times.

Pas members and supporters of the conservative Islamic political party are suffering from an election hangover.

Defeat and failure to live up to pre-election predictions of snaring more real estate on the political map have temporarily sapped leaders and members of their spirit. Regret consumes Pas members these days. Days are long and nights restless as they sit in stalls pondering what went wrong.

The last thing they want to read in this dark mood is more analyses on the March 21 election or more pointed attacks on the mishandling of the polls by the Election Commission. In short, they could do without an exclusive diet of political news.

What a change from the days in 1998 when Harakah grew from a tabloid sold in hole-in-the-wall shops to arguably the best-selling newspaper in the land, almost overnight. The fallout from the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim led to people questioning the official line like never before. Alternative media sprouted like mushrooms after rain and the biggest winner was Harakah.

Its sales jumped from 80,000 in the pre-Anwar issue days to 366,000 in 1999. Today, it hovers around the respectable 160,000 mark.

Party officials are not surprised with the downward trend. They note that attendances at some party functions have dipped significantly, but argue that it is to be expected.

Dr Syed Azman Syed Ahmad, the former MP for Kuala Terengganu, says: "The next two years will be a period of consolidation for Pas. We will have to examine our strategies. Of course, some people are demoralised because all of us worked very hard. But after a while, everyone will recover and we will start preparing again."

The amiable politician was one of the many young professionals who joined Pas after the sacking of Anwar. These days, he works with the Carter Foundation on its election-monitoring team. In recent weeks, he has been to Indonesia and South Korea.

Other party leaders have also been travelling abroad, especially London, to continue building a network with Muslim groups and firm up relations with mainstream political parties overseas.

Says another leader, who prefers anonymity: "We are not standing still but we have to go through this process of looking at our own weaknesses. This is unsettling for many."

He notes that Umno also was in the doldrums for about three years after its dismal election performance in 1999 and experienced trying times on its way back up. "Our goal is to make sure that we don't take as long as

Umno did to finish our soul-searching," he adds.

For many Pas leaders, the new infusion of oxygen into their lungs could come as early as September after the Umno elections. Ground reports tell them that there are intense battles being fought in all 191 Umno divisions.

They also know that ambition and greed for power by certain ruling party politicians always lead to acrimony and bruised egos - fertile ground for the Islamic conservative party to exploit.

For example in the 1986 election, Pas only had one parliamentary seat: Pengkalan Chepa. It was a bit player until the major battle in 1987, sparked off by the challenge by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah against Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad (now Tun) led to the split in Umno and the forming of Semangat 46.

Pas took full advantage of the fissures in the Malay community and increased its representation in Parliament to seven in 1990.

History repeated itself after the 1995 election when Umno won big. Three years later, Dr Mahathir sacked Anwar and once again the ruling party fell into an abyss of infighting, and some members formed Parti Keadilan Nasional.

Once again, Pas rode on the split. It performed remarkably well in the 1999 general election, winning 27 parliamentary seats.

Those gains were slashed down to five parliamentary seats when it took on a united Umno in 2004.

Ahmad Lutfi Othman, a freelance journalist, wrote recently: "Many people believe that Umno usually splits after it has done very well in the general election. Their politicians may feel comfortable that there is no strong opposition and feel that they can afford to go all out against each other."

Pas believes that history will repeat itself.

It believes that the strain and tension generated in the run-up to the ruling party's polls in September will give it a platform to rebound from the state of listlessness it finds itself in.

Who can argue with history?

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