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Pas' Islamic state gambit

Shamsul Akmar

It has been three months since Pas unveiled its Islamic state document. The momentum seems to have dissipated and Umno leaders say it is not getting much attention from the people despite efforts by Pas to hype it, writes SHAMSUL AKMAR.

THE front page of the latest edition of the Pas official newsletter Harakah carries a picture of party president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang in his trademark turban and flowing robe, mingling with foreign diplomats.

The report carried the heading "Pas Mampu Perintah Negara" (Pas is capable of ruling the nation).

The play of picture and heading by Harakah is interesting, to say the least. It is a message Pas has been trying to send to the nation since its impressive outing in the 1999 general election - that it will not settle for only the Malay-dominated states, and wants the whole nation.

But the realities of the Malaysian political landscape do not favour Pas. Every time its Governments in Kelantan and Terengganu come up with new policies laced with Islamic conjectures, negative reactions from the rest of the country will come thick and fast.

Amid all this, Pas unveiled its Islamic state document in November last year.

The document was a response to Umno's challenge to Pas to declare its concept of an Islamic state. The gauntlet was thrown down by then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who in 2002 declared that Malaysia was already an Islamic state.

It has been three months since Pas unveiled its Islamic state document. Despite the publicity blitz before and after the document was made public, the momentum seems to have dissipated.

Says Terengganu Umno deputy chief Datuk Idris Jusoh: "The document itself is not getting much attention from the electorate. It is only Pas which is trying to hype it.

"We do not see the document as something which can influence voting trends here as there is nothing substantial in it."

While Idris dismisses the document as inconsequential, the DAP is more concerned with its potential effect on the nation's psyche.

"The nation will now have to choose between Pas' Islamic state and what Umno has to offer," argues former DAP deputy secretary-general Lim Guan Eng. "Umno is confident that its version will get support from a cross-section of society and help it win the election.

"But to us, both versions are inappropriate as we should be upholding our original social contract as provided in the Constitution.

Thus far, the DAP, an ally of Pas during the 1999 general election but which fell out with its former partner in 2001, has been conducting "road shows" to oppose the Islamic state pronouncements by both Umno and Pas.

It faces an uphill task, as the nation does seem divided between those compromising with Umno's Islamic state and those seduced by Pas' version.

If public reactions reflect national sentiment, it is obvious that Pas is only supported by its own followers and those who oppose the Barisan Nasional.

Pas vice-president Azizan Abdul Razak dismisses such contentions. "What is the yardstick for our detractors to conclude that Pas is isolated from the rest of the nation because of our Islamic state document?" he asks.

"We have had our road shows to explain the document, and the response

from Muslims and non-Muslims and the NGOs (non-governmental organisations) has been very positive."

But Umno's Idris disputes this, arguing that in Terengganu, the non-Malays, having lived under Pas rule for the past four years, are dissatisfied with their governance.

"They are also concerned over the lack of economic opportunities. In the final analysis, the issue is still about bread and butter."

Pas' Azizan, however, sees that the Islamic state document has been boosted by recent cases of child rape and murder.

"With society and even Umno leaders calling for stringent laws and punishments, we are now saying that that is what we have been promoting through our hudud laws under the Islamic state concept.

"Before this, many described the laws as primitive and unsuitable for modern times. Now look who is pushing for the death penalty, public flogging and other firmer punishments.

"We have been telling the NGOs and liberals who seem more concerned about the welfare of the perpetrator that the Islamic laws we propose are more concerned for the plight of the victims."

While Azizan believes that Pas is gaining ground in the present climate, MCA deputy president Datuk Seri Chan Kong Choy took the issue one step further.

"Pas' document is a direct affront to our multi-ethnic co-existence. It has become a tool to segregate the people by religion.

"All these years the Government has been trying to bring the people together and the document will undo all these efforts."

But the DAP views the MCA and Gerakan as those who have compromised the spirit of the Constitution.

"Right now, society is indeed divided, either compromise and accept Umno's moderate version of an Islamic state or be seduced by Pas' Islamic state.

"The MCA and Gerakan represent the compromise while Keadilan represents the seduced.

"With that, the Islamic state is no more a question of if and when; it is a question of which: Umno's or Pas'.

"Such a question is wrong. Neither is it a choice. It is a Catch-22 or a Hobson's choice," says DAP's Lim.

But MCA's Chan defended his party's decision to go with Umno.

"The declaration does not change existing practice. What the Government has done under its Islamic state concept was to introduce a dual system.

Take Islamic banking as an example. The conventional system is still available. Similarly in the legal aspects. There is the civil court and there is the syariah court.

"In short, the rights of every citizen are guaranteed under the Umno Islamic state concept."

Given MCA and Gerakan's readiness to accept Umno's version, why does Pas promote its version, which will obviously scare away non-Malay voters as well as moderate Malays?

Umno leaders have repeatedly depicted the document as a ploy to woo voters, a charge Pas president Hadi has admitted unabashedly.

Hadi's reasoning is simple: They need to win the election to implement the principles contained in the document.

But how can Pas expect to win if non-Malays are obviously uncomfortable with its concept of an Islamic state?

It can only be concluded that Pas' priorities at this stage are not for non-Malay votes, as it plans to contest Malay-majority constituencies.

In short, what Pas needs to establish is that it is the leading Malay party in the country. Only then will it have the bargaining power with the

parties representing the other races.