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Young Turks battle for reforms in Pas

By Abdul Razak Ahmad

Several young leaders in Pas have been very vocal about the need for the party to change in order to stay relevant. ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD examines why the call for change is being made, how strong the voices are, and where it is heading.

ASK Mujahid Yusuf what he wants from Pas, and the reply comes without hesitation.

"The world has changed, the country's political scenario has changed, and Umno has changed, so Pas too needs to change in order to keep up with these developments."

Changes? In Pas?

"Yes, we need to change the mentality of our members," Mujahid explains.

"We need to change the way we interact with the public, with our opponents, and we need to realise that we are now in a world of practical solutions to problems, not rhetoric centred on the Islamic State issue alone."

Mujahid's views are raising eyebrows both within and outside the party. It would be easy for Pas to dismiss him if he was a mere nobody.

He isn't. Mujahid is a Pas Youth executive council member, and his words also carry some weight because he is the son of the late Yusuf Rawa, the former Pas president whose name is held in high esteem in the party.

Mujahid drew attention by speaking his mind on Pas' failings that led to the party's disastrous showing in the 2004 election. At the party's annual general assembly in August last year, he openly criticised the party for failing to acknowledge its shortcomings.

Mujahid is perhaps the most public party figure urging reform, but he is not alone. He is backed by Pas Youth, with the movement's head Salahuddin Ayub leading the call for change.

Both men say that the desire for change runs deep and spreads wide among the younger members. The call for change began in earnest after last year's general election, but the voices are growing louder.

With Pas scheduled to hold its first post-2004 general election party polls in June, one wonders where all these calls are heading.

Salahuddin says it is going to go all the way to the party ballot box.

"Any individual in our political struggle who cannot adapt to change will end up being thrown out, be they an ulama or a professional."

Salahuddin cites the ouster of former Pas president Datuk Asri Muda in 1983 as an example of the kind of change that Pas Youth is capable of affecting.

Pas under Asri's leadership joined the Barisan Nasional, but the union was short-lived, and Pas' fortunes dwindled in the 1978 general election.

Dissatisfaction with Asri led to internal conflict. The party's Young Turks - most notably Datuk Fadzil Mohd Noor and Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang - banded together under Yusuf to take over the party leadership.

Yusuf's ascent led to the formalisation of the principle of leadership by ulama in Pas. It set the foundations for the conservativeness and ideology-driven politics that characterises the party today.

Mujahid, the youngest of Yusuf's 11 children, remembers those years in the early 1980s well. His family had returned to Malaysia several years before from Iran, where Yusuf served a stint as ambassador.

"It was a significant era for Pas, but after 22 years, the time has now come for us to re-examine our situation," he says.

"I salute the ulama of that generation for their accomplishment. But it's no longer enough," says Mujahid.

One factor driving the call for change is the party's showing at the polls. Pas won 27 seats in the 1999 general election but now holds only five. The 2004 general election also saw Pas losing Terengganu and coming within inches of being ousted from Kelantan.

Then there is the "Pak Lah" factor. One reason why Pas needs to change the way it does things and how it deals with Umno is because the ruling party has moved on.

Former Umno president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's combative style when dealing with Pas kept the Opposition party occupied, but his successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's approach, which went down well with voters, is making life difficult Pas.

"Abdullah does not engage Pas the same way Dr Mahathir did," says political observer Ibrahim Suffian from the Merdeka Centre.

"Pas no longer has a `sparring partner' so it needs to improve on how it articulates to the people what the party is all about."

A large concentration of younger members and professionals in the party nowadays is also shifting the balance in the party and providing the impetus for change.

Salahuddin says the influx of younger members into Pas increased significantly following the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from Umno. The ratio of younger (which he defined as those below 50 years of age) and older members in Pas is now about 50:50.

"The non-ulama - people from various professional fields - of which there are many now in Pas, see things differently," explains Mujahid.

"They interpret things differently compared to the traditional ulama in Pas, and this is where the `conflict' started."

Salahuddin, the 44-year-old Kubang Kerian Member of Parliament who took over the leadership of Pas Youth from Mahfuz Omar in 2003, says that it is important for Pas to adopt a less confrontational approach towards Umno.

"I think Pas should not miss the opportunity to be with the Government on certain issues where we share a common stand," says Salahuddin.

"We remain steadfast in our policies, but politics is a very wide field, and there is much room for Pas to play its part."

Still, not everyone is convinced that Pas is able to move in the direction that the younger members want it to take. Kelantan Umno information chief Md Alwi Che Ahmad is one of them.

"Come to Kelantan and you can see for yourself how strong the hatred Pas harbours towards Umno," he says.

Alwi cites the case of mosque congregations being led by two imam from opposing sides, and of Pas supporters who refuse to attend feasts organised by Umno supporters because the meat slaughtered by the Umno supporter was not considered halal.

"The problem with Pas is that their struggle is situational, which is why they keep changing," says Alwi. "At one point they were accusing us of being infidels; now they want a softer approach. At one point they were all rhetoric; now they want less of it."

Alwi, the MP for Ketersih, describes Salahuddin as a friend despite their political differences.

"I think Salahuddin is a very good example of an open-minded Pas leader, but I don't think he can succeed because the problem with Pas is in the content, not the packaging."

There is also the question of how far the party leadership will support the call for change.

"I believe Salahuddin is sincere in wanting to see change in Pas," says political analyst Dr Mohammad Agus Yusoff from Universiti Kebangsaan

Malaysia.

"But unless he gets strong support from the party seniors, I don't think he will be able to get very far."

Agus says that while much of the noise about wanting to change is coming from Pas Youth and the party's younger generation, he doesn't see "a widespread willingness to change among the senior leaders".

Ultimately, the aspiration for change leads to the question of whether it is a sign of protest towards the party president, Abdul Hadi, who ultimately bears the responsibility for Pas' dwindling influence.

Both Salahuddin and Mujahid take great pains to emphasise that it isn't. They say the change they are calling for falls well within a framework accepted by Hadi and the Pas leadership.

The duo admit that the road to change faces difficult obstacles. They say the negative attitude by some among the older generation in Pas, a lack of trust, and self-interests by those who believe their positions are under threat are among the stumbling blocks.

But they remain steadfast in their cause.

"The younger generation detests the rhetoric-filled, narrow-minded and hostile politics that has come to characterise the Pas-Umno struggle," says Mujahid.

"We want a friendlier politics, where we compete with Umno on the issues affecting the people and the country."

(END) Source : New Straits Times