

PAS snubs Umno call for union, in blow to PM
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Islamist party PAS today rejected a government offer for it to join the ruling coalition, dealing a blow to Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's bid to weaken the opposition as he looks to consolidate power ahead of a possible snap general election.

PAS, a group of clerics and professionals who want to establish an Islamic state, is the biggest party in Anwar Ibrahim's Pakatan Rakyat coalition and could hold the ticket to federal power in the next polls.

The ruling BN coalition has tried for years to woo the Islamist party to join its camp but the efforts have gained traction in recent months as Anwar fights allegations of sodomy and extra-marital sex, both forbidden by Islam.

PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang (middle in photo) dismissed as desperate the government's attempts to court the party, after addressing delegates ahead of internal polls on Saturday which are expected to pick the party's next leader.

"Why do they keep making offers?" Abdul Hadi asked reporters. "Are they so desperate that they need our help?"

"I have met with PAS members in all states and found our cooperation with opposition partners good, so we will continue to be with the Pakatan Rakyat for the general election."

PAS holds 23 of 222 seats in parliament, but for decades its support never extended beyond rural Malay enclaves as it insisted on establishing a strict Islamic state in which adulterers are stoned and thieves suffer amputations.

That changed when a team of reformists swept to power in 2005, moderating the party's stand on a theocratic state and gaining support from non-Muslim ethnic minority Chinese and Indians.

Rejection negatively affects Najib

The backing helped the opposition to record wins in the last general election in 2008.

"(The rejection) will negatively affect Najib because he has been trying to unify the majority Malay Muslim behind him, so this decision by PAS would work in the opposition's favour in the coming general election," said Bridget Welsh, a Malaysia specialist at Singapore Management University.

"PAS has never been this close to wresting power nationally, so the majority will take up the call to stick with the opposition and strengthen it further ahead of the general election," says political analyst Sayuti Omar.

Over 1,000 delegates to the PAS meeting, dressed in traditional Malay dress and white skull-caps chanted "Allahu Akbar" as Abdul Hadi vowed to lead the party in wresting power from the ruling coalition.

The opposition coalition, which also comprises a secular, mainly ethnic Chinese party and the middle-ground PKR, has been rocked by allegations that Anwar had sex with a former male aide and more recently, that he was filmed having sex with an unidentified woman.

Anwar has denied both charges but some analysts have said the accusations could tarnish his image in the eyes of conservative Muslims, some of whom are PAS members.

A general election isn't due until 2013. However, some analysts think Najib could call for snap polls this year to take advantage of the strong economic growth and with Anwar distracted by his sodomy court

battles.

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