

Mat Sabu: The cosmopolitan, democrat Islamist
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For a man touted to usher a new era for the nation's second largest political party, recently elected PAS deputy president Mohamad Sabu is really your average Mat.

Arriving for an interview with Malaysiakini last week in a tiny Proton Savvy, the 57-year-old flashes his toothy grin.

Almost embarrassed by his formal wear, Mohamad, better known as Mat Sabu, said: "I have to meet the Syrian ambassador afterwards, that's why I'm dressed like this. Or else I'll just be in a T-shirt."

The sight of Mat Sabu in a T-shirt is a common sight for followers of Malaysian politics, such as when the PAS leader donned a yellow one and marched with about 40,000 Malaysians in December 2007 for free and fair elections.

In fact, it is on this platform that the straight-talking politician delved into party politics after dipping his toes in the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (Abim) during his student days in the late 1970s.

Recalling those days, Mat Sabu said that joining Abim's campaign for PAS in the 1978 election which followed the Kelantan emergency in 1977 ignited a sense of anger towards a system which disallows the Opposition the same platform to speak.

"Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) was deputy prime minister and education minister and he was free to campaign on school grounds, while PAS was banned from ceramah.

"I saw how unfair this was, and thought if this was democracy in Malaysia, then it's really in bad shape. So when we came back (from Kelantan), I went straight to PAS headquarters and filled in the membership form.

"I did not join PAS because of its Islamic platform or because I was anti-Umno. It was for want of a better democracy and it is a struggle which my colleagues and I continue until now," he said.

A 'Marxist' PAS leader?

The fact that he does not hail from a religious background has been a point of attack for his detractors, and responding to this, the affable leader quotes an unlikely figure to deflect the accusations — **Karl Marx himself**.

Marx said that religion is the opium for the people...(In the past) priests supported cruel tsars, wages were neglected, Christian leaders supported oppressive monarchs, so if they wanted to bring social change (at the time), they have to reject religion.

"Religion is like opium too in Malaysia and in the Arab nations. This view is highly controversial...but I see religion being misused," he said, adding that this would probably have him accused of being from a "different following".

Defending his 'different' view, the father of four whose shock of black hair hides his age said that his quest remains to advocate for an Islam in substance and not just in name.

Although he does not admit it, the leader - who attributes his youthful appearance to his famous sense of humour - has been accused of subscribing to the Shiite school of thought.

The school of thought is considered deviant in Malaysia, the Muslim population of which follow the Sunni school.

The links could be traced to Mat Sabu's unabashed admiration for the late Ayatollah Khomeini who led the Iranian revolution in 1979 - an event which the former said formed much of his point of view.

"Why do I support Khomeini? Because he used religion to mobilise for change against the Shah... (In our society) we have ulama who (use religion to) cover up the mistakes of the powerful," he said.

Marx, he added, would have changed his mind about religion being an opiate had he lived through the Iranian revolution.

A bond built behind bars

His sense of fair play was further soldered through his double detention under the Internal Security Act, once in 1984 for 60 days, after which he was banished to Kuala Pilah until 1986.

In 1987, he was among the scores arrested under Operation Lalang, spending a total of two years behind bars where he forged close ties with leaders in PAS and DAP, particularly Penang's current chief minister Lim Guan Eng (above with Mat Sabu in May 2009).

"At the (Kamunting detention) camp, there is nothing much to do in the evening, so (Lim and Mat Sabu) chatted and discussed views and I found more similarities than differences between us.

"When (Lim) was released, he was re-arrested for revealing information relating to the former (Melaka) chief minister (Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik) so I saw him as an oppressed person. He may not be Muslim, but I felt it was compulsory for me to defend him," he said.

He added that even when Lim was "broke without a job and a pension", he continued to have close ties with the latter "through drinks whenever I am in Malacca" and the bond has remained strong until today.

If Mat Sabu's ties with Lim has been steadfast at worst, the same cannot be said of his relationship with PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Days before Anwar was sacked as Finance Minister and deputy premier, Mat Sabu took a stand completely different to that of his party on the former's sodomy charge, even labelling Anwar as al-Juburi (a play on words for the Malay slang word for anus).

Torn by Anwar

Skirting the issue, Mat Sabu, however, admitted that Anwar's departure from Abim in 1982 "memakan hati" (tore at the hearts) of Abim members and led to his protest departure.

I was his number one attacker, we were political enemies... But in Islam, you are supposed to speak the truth against a corrupt leader, not someone who has retired or no longer in power," he said, claiming to have made up with Anwar soon after he was sacked.

But remnants of the long-drawn out battle between the duo appear still evident with Mat Sabu claiming to only have met his former nemesis "on the ceramah circuit" and never in one-on-one meetings.

For someone who had emerged from a sex scandal relatively unscathed, the avid reader on international politics may have something to teach Anwar in facing the sex video allegedly of him.

The incident in 1995, wherein Mat Sabu was accused but acquitted of khalwat (close proximity with a non-family member of the opposite gender), was brushed off by the leader as somewhat irrelevant to his political rise.

"I was elected into the central working committee that year, then vice president for two terms and now

deputy. I don't think it had any effect within PAS. Outside, I had complaints (of having among) the largest majority when contesting for Kubang Kerian in 1995," he said.

Mat Sabu was elected into parliament thrice - for the constituency of Nilam Puri in 1990, Kubang Kerian in 1995 and Kuala Kedah in 1999.

Some believe that his dissenting view on Anwar was the reason he was sent to contest in backwater Kuala Kedah instead of Kubang Kerian where he had won earlier by a landslide.

Today, however, Mat Sabu toes the coalition line by saying that the onus is for the accusers to provide evidence of Anwar's wrongdoing before PAS can state its position.

It may not be what the Mat Sabu of 'al-Juburi' fame would have liked, but the party's newly-minted number two is both pragmatic, a believer of human rights and the right to defend one's self.

By keeping true to his grassroots NGO ideals, Mat Sabu is bringing in a more diverse crowd the Islamic party's way, fast changing its face to truly fit its slogan—PAS for all.

Interview conducted by Aidila Razak, Lee Way Loon and Salhan K Ahmad.

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