

PAS woes reminiscent of Umno split in 1987

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COMMENT The current struggle between the ulama and the Erdogans in PAS brings reminiscences of Umno's split in 1987, when then-prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Team A fended off the challenge from a growing voice of dissent in the political faction, Team B led by one of its vice-presidents.

The recent week has unfolded, with one faction firing salvos on each other, with more to be expected during the muktamar PAS in Batu Pahat in the next few days. This is to be expected of any political party, until its deputy spiritual adviser, Haron Din, issued a gag order barring members from openly voicing their unhappiness over the party's leadership rift.

At this juncture, it is the party's spiritual adviser, Tok Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat who plays a vital role in uniting both factions of the party, but even the octogenarian does not have many years more to live.

Unless both factions can quickly close ranks, and mend the relationships with its Pakatan component parties, PAS may end up like Umno during the 1987 crisis, where at the end of the day Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's (left) Team B had to bow out to form Semangat 46.

The split in PAS may benefit the Pakatan Rakyat coalition because its Erdogan faction would naturally gravitate towards Pakatan, but at the same time, its disillusioned supporters may end up throwing their support behind Umno.

What most ordinary Malaysians fail to understand is that it is the Erdogan faction within PAS that has been the PAS face within Pakatan. Names of leaders such as deputy president Mohamad Sabu are well-known within the Pakatan circle, but like Tengku Razaleigh during the 1987 crisis, he is only one of the generals in PAS.

Hadi's directions

Experience has shown that PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang's words can only be taken on face value. His style of leadership appears to be more autocratic - which reminds one of Dr Mahathir's "I did it my way" style - than Abdullah A Badawi's egalitarian and consultative style of leadership.

It suits the current PAS culture, where followers are merely there to prod the leaders. This is clearly seen from the recent Selangor menteri besar crisis, where Hadi, despite a decision made by the central committee to nominate Wan Azizah Wan Ismail as the next menteri besar, Hadi could make a unilateral decision.

To the third party, this is undemocratic, but Hadi and the ulama faction have defended his actions, saying that it was in line with the Sultan's request. Nothing else matters. The central committee is as good as "powerless" under the thumbs of the president himself.

Should there be a power tussle between the two factions, it is usually the more gentlemanly egalitarian faction that will have to leave the organisation. This will further reinforce the culture of autocracy in PAS, in the same manner that the new Umno, under Dr Mahathir, has evolved into.

The current spate of arrests under the Sedition Act is basically the result of such political climate, where the voice of dissent deserves only to be quashed. It no longer sees the political opponents as people with views that could otherwise challenge and expand one's horizon.

Hadi in his speech during the 60th PAS muktamar in Batu Pahat said that he would not agree to a unity government with Umno. However, Pakatan leaders who are watching the unfolding of events, would now want to take this with a pinch of salt, since PAS culture has allowed one man to dictate the direction of the party, when all other people's views do not matter anymore.

Whilst Mat Sabu may vehemently oppose the appointment of a PAS candidate as Selangor MB, the power still lies with one man, Hadi, himself. The grapevine in Pakatan circles is now saying that PAS is Hadi, and Hadi is PAS.

Unless PAS' political culture changes or there is a new president replacing Hadi, its credibility within Pakatan would be an uphill battle for the Islamist party.

PAS' future is with Pakatan

In the next few days, it would be interesting to see how PAS deals with the question of whether they will continue with Pakatan, and whether the critical pressure group, PasMa can or will continue to cooperate with Pakatan component parties. Pundits are suggesting that it could be a potential splinter from the Islamist party.

Haron has taken the wise decision to seek its ulama council to review its 'tahaluf siasi' (cooperation) with Pakatan, to avoid a split within PAS. The venerated advisor said PAS leaders should avoid the squabbling between each another as that would only lead to animosity.

With Pakatan, Haron has put forward a pragmatic solution: "If it is beyond repair, just take the concept of divorce in marriage, even if it is detested."

However, both PAS and Pakatan know that in the Umno/BN war room, the strategists are working overtime in a psychological warfare to split the opposition. They cannot underestimate the BN's massive war machinery that is aimed at them.

Although currently the decision appears to stick with Pakatan, there will also undoubtedly be factions (call them implants or whatever) within the party that will try to upset the good working relationship with the other component parties, in particular, the DAP.

They also know that it was the result of close cooperation between the three major parties - PKR, PAS and DAP - during the last two general elections that saw the political tsunami in 2008, and to a large extent, a massive voting pattern amongst the Chinese and Indians - coincidentally, viewed by Umno chief, Najib Abdul Razak as the Chinese tsunami - that supported PAS candidates in 2013.

As former MB of Selangor, Muhammad Taib, a former Umno warlord, has pointed out, it clearly shows that Umno/BN's war strategists will work overtime just to drive a wedge between PAS and the Chinese and Indian community.

"Remember, if Chinese and Indians do not vote for PAS, PAS will lose. I have been through so many elections, I know. When they vote for you, they will do so in droves. When they desert you, they will all do so," he was quoted saying during a forum.

In other words, after the spate of verbal attacks, there needs to be the political maturity to seek and mend strained relations, besides also changing the old ways. Nothing short of an outpouring of forgiveness would bring about healing of emotions within the brotherhood of PAS, and with its Pakatan supporters.

To be respected by their partners in Pakatan, PAS leaders would have to shed their image as being arrogant or dictatorial in their old way of handling issues. On the same breath, PAS, feeling that it was not treated an equal partner within the coalition, should seek for greater understanding from the Pakatan leaders themselves.

PAS leaders know well that it cannot allow the muktamar this weekend to end with a negative anticlimax that could cause further cracks within the party in the months ahead.