

Muktamar fails to heal PAS, death knell for Pakatan
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MUKTAMAR ANALYSIS As the veils came down yesterday on what could have been a significant 60th PAS muktamar for the Islamic party's political expansion beyond its traditional east coast heartland, delegates were instead left with the real peril of Pakatan Rakyat's disintegration that will threaten to undo its electoral inroads.

The historic muktamar, organised for the first time in Umno's birthplace of Johor, was intended as a message to BN that its reign since independence is nigh.

Pakatan in the 2013 general election made unprecedented gains in the Umno fortress, gaining 18 seats in the 56-member state assembly, giving the state a real opposition for the first time.

Johor PAS, with its guns pointed at archrival Umno, had gone to great lengths at organising the party's annual general assembly in the state to build on that momentum.

But as delegates nationwide descended onto Batu Pahat for the three-day muktamar that began on Thursday, they instead had their guns pointed at one another as disagreements over the Selangor crisis boiled over.

PAS went into its muktamar as a divided party over PKR's bid to replace its once popular Selangor menteri besar Abdul Khalid Ibrahim, with whom it had increasing difficulties working with.

PAS leaders generally disapproved of PKR's move to rock the boat but pro-Pakatan leaders in the Islamic party, most of whom are professionals who wanted to see a quick resolution, were content to go along with PKR's chosen replacement.

But conservative leaders in the Islamic party led by PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang were resistant to PKR's choice, and eventually even pushed for PAS' own to vie for the top job.

This disagreement had been simmering for the last two months and when the muktamar arrived, it was marred by a walkout, booings, microphone-snatching, a bizarre prayer to bash opponents and countless attacks between pro-Pakatan supporters and conservative supporters.

The situation was so heated that PAS deputy spiritual Haron Din issued a gag order on delegates from further discussing the Selangor crisis and the Islamic party's internal strife.

Grassroots upset at confusion

While the opposing camps were the most vociferous in their views, most of the other delegates just wanted a proper sense of direction from the top leadership instead of the confused signals the feuding camps were sending over the Selangor crisis.

PAS Perlis delegate Wan Kharizal Wan Khazim best described this agitation among grassroots as he related how the Islamic party's members were afraid to visit coffee shops since the start of the Selangor crisis.

"Last time our members can go to coffee shops and talk about Umno's wrongs but when the Selangor crisis started, no one dared to go any more as they don't know what answer to give when people ask us about it.

"After Aug 17, they returned to the coffee shops with a smile because they thought they had an answer, but they eventually had to hide themselves again because of the confusion (of subsequent developments).

"This cannot continue, we need a clear decision," he said.

After much uncertainty about PAS' position in the early days of the crisis, the party central committee on Aug 17 decided to endorse PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and her deputy Azmin Ali as candidates for the menteri besar.

Their representatives at the subsequent Pakatan leaders' meeting that same day agreed with PKR's stand on submitting just Wan Azizah's name.

However, they were later overruled by Hadi who was supported by the powerful syura council that insisted that the president has veto power.

Wan Khairizal's appeal did little to help, as leaders of opposing camps in their winding-up speeches took shots at each other, though more subtly than their hot-blooded young supporters.

PAS central committee member Mohamed Hanipa Maidin, who is also the party's legal bureau chief, insisted that Hadi and the syura council had overstepped their powers.

On the opposing side, acting Dewan Ulama chief Mahfodz Mohamed made it a point to remind delegates that the cleric's wing was the party's "Abang Long" (big brother), before quoting scriptures on why the president can overrule the central committee.

Leaders still at odds

Meanwhile, PAS central committee Hatta Ramli dropped an ambiguous 'praise' for Hadi stating, "PAS is quite lucky to have a president who carries out his duty without the need of veto power as he can make strong arguments,"

He went on to state that people were uncomfortable with veto power in a democracy that

promotes inclusiveness.

PAS information chief Mahfuz Omar, who acknowledged his disagreements with Hadi, related how someone during a meeting long ago had thrown a crumpled piece of paper at the face of then PAS president Yusuf Rawa.

"Even the one who threw the paper was a cleric," he said in an apparent swipe at conservatives, adding. "But we are civil in our meetings, we don't do that."

And while the opposing leaders failed to provide a clear direction, most if not all at least took pains to cool down the heated situation.

"Leave leadership issues to the leaders, don't try to carry them on your backs or you will become dizzy; just relax," said a jovial vice-president Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man.

Even PAS deputy president Mohamad Sabu, who was the main target of conservatives for his conflicting position with Hadi, joked about the bashing he had received and went on to explain himself in a diplomatic manner peppered with humour.

Towards the near end of the muktamar, the firefighting efforts appeared to be paying off as leaders and supporters seemed prepared to agree to disagree, until Hadi in his final speech broke the reconciliatory mood with his bombshell.

Ignoring the opportunity for ceasefire, Hadi went on to label the two PAS state assemblypersons who had unilaterally supported Wan Azizah as "lackeys" (barua) and accused his Pakatan partners of "stealing" and "buying over" them.

He also alluded that Wan Azizah was not chosen as menteri besar for her capability or responsibility, warning that PAS members would be condemned to hell if they went ahead with it.

The defiant stance suggested Hadi was not prepared to heed several delegate's call to keep to PAS' promise that the Selangor menteri besar position belonged to PKR.

No closure

Hadi's closing speech is unlikely to give closure to confused delegates as even their party secretary-general Mustafa Ali's response to journalists after the muktamar was just as confused, when asked whether PAS will accept the menteri besar position.

"If the position is given to PKR, PAS will support it. But if the position is given to PAS, I don't want to comment," he said.

With the PAS muktamar unwilling to make the painful decision on the menteri besar position, which would have put the professionals and conservatives on a collision course in a vote, all eyes are now on the swearing-in ceremony of the yet-to-be named Selangor

menteri besar on Tuesday.

Leaders such as Hanipa had urged a realistic approach at the muktamar, warning that DAP and PKR will not support a PAS menteri besar and may lead to snap polls, but was booed down by party observers.

Even PAS vice-president Husam Musa pointed out that nine of 15 PAS state seats in Selangor were won with marginal majorities, warning that the Islamic party could lose them without Pakatan's support.

However, these views were drowned out by conservative leaders who were determined to take a purely religious view, believing that somehow PKR's choice would not receive, in Hadi's own words, "Allah's acceptance".

Mokhtar Senik (left), a delegate from the Ulama wing, best reflected this school of thought when he declared at the muktamar, "Even if it means waiting for 1,000 years before we achieve victory, we will remain with our struggle based on the Quran."

But as PAS leaders bicker over differing interpretations of scriptures or pragmatic considerations, the fate of the six-year-old Pakatan coalition is now out of their hands.

Hadi and the muktamar's clear stance that it will not join forces with Umno, announced early on at the muktamar, is unlikely to help.

On Tuesday, the Selangor sultan's will not only decide on the new chief executive officer from either PKR or PAS for his state, but indirectly also the survival of Pakatan as a coalition.

If PAS' candidate is chosen and Hadi remains insistent on the position, it would mark the beginning of a possible disintegration of Pakatan, as its partners will see it as a clear act of betrayal.