

## **Crunch-time differences between PAS and Umno**

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**By Terence Netto**

COMMENT The contrast between them could not be more striking.

One, Umno, is the largest political party, and the dominant one, in the country with nearly 3.4 million members.

The other, PAS, is the second largest political party and aspires to replace perennial rivals Umno as the dominant one in Malaysia.

Even though it has less than one-third Umno's membership, PAS is growing steadily - it just added 8,000 members to its rolls, to bring its aggregate membership to just over a 1 million people.

In recent months, both parties have been in the throes of internal struggles.

Umno's has been over a perception that its president Najib Abdul Razak has blundered, possibly catastrophically, in the way he has superintended a sovereign wealth fund, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), with implications of 'systemic risk' to the national economy, though that is denied on supposedly good authority.

The PAS ailment is a long-simmering gulf between its theologians and its professionals that is headed for a climatic vote which will decide the future of the party as a cohesive entity.

Umno called a meeting of its division chiefs on March 8 to discuss matters affecting the party and emerged with unanimous support for the president, though ominously, its deputy president ducked out of attendance and a state chief who stands to benefit from any leadership change was absent.

PAS is rolling out its nomination process for party elections in June, said to be the most critical in its 63-year history. In contrast to Umno's unanimity, the PAS nominations process is turning out to be a showcase of democratic choice and dissent.

The contrast between the rival parties could not be starker: one, after months of revelations on the fragility of the heavily indebted 1MDB venture, opts for a contrived unity that holds that all's well that seems well; the other lets the chips fall where they may.

Both parties have availed themselves of the democratic process of self-inquiry, but whereas one has emerged with a faux unanimity, the other is trusting to the paradoxical notion that a healthy pluralism of choice may yet underpin a mature unity of collectively agreed purpose.

What's more, even if Umno opts for a leadership change from sudden realisation of the

dangers posed by 1MDB, the change would only entail a shuffling of the levers of power among its existing holders rather than an actual transfer of it from one reform-questing group to another.

That would not be the case in PAS in the current battle for control of the party between its conservatives and its professionals: so clear is the divide that a triumph for one slate will translate into distinct leverage for them in the hierarchy, with high impact on attitudes and policies.

### **Professionals appear to hold the upper hand**

In a contest of this sort, the side that ought to triumph must be the one that can give the more persuasive reasons for the stances they take and the policies they back.

In this respect, it is the professionals that appear to hold the upper hand.

They have furnished the better reasons for PAS to stick with the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, and to back the decisions collectively arrived at in the leadership councils of this coalition.

By contrast, the conservatives have relied on dogma, ideology and tradition in support of their stances and policy choices.

When these conflict with majority opinion within Pakatan, it's the latter that will have to yield or be set aside, for dogma is sacrosanct.

This preponderance of dogma over reason can be deduced from Kelantan PAS' reaction to the latest opinion survey conducted by Merdeka Centre which reported that people of the state are keener on flood relief measures than on hudud implementation.

The misery brought on by disastrous flooding in the state in late December and early January is not enough reason for their government to cool its ardour in wanting hudud implemented.

But the mullahs of Kelantan PAS hold that they are going about God's business, so implementing the Deity's laws must override mundane considerations.

That being so, it is a huge relief that in the trickle of nominations for party posts thus far, PAS vice-president Husam Musa has garnered two nominations, one from the Kota Tinggi division and the other from Batu Sapi, for the post of party resident.

Two nominations are the minimum for a candidate to contest and Husam - who is an economist, not a theologian - has met the criterion.

That does not mean he will contest the post but the fact that this early in the process he is enabled to contest is news that Pakatan supporters will doff their caps to.

They know that it's too soon for forecasts in the struggle between conservatives and professionals in the PAS polls this June, but that a signal member of the latter band is ahead this early in the nominations race is cause for mild rejoicing.

Earlier reports that incumbent president Abdul Hadi Awang, a dogmatist, would be uncontested are turning out to be unrealistic.

Hadi himself has said that his post could be contested although it has rarely been in the party's 63-year history.

In this respect at least, he has not been in thrall to tradition.

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TERENCE NETTO has been a journalist for more than four decades. A sobering discovery has been that those who protest the loudest tend to replicate the faults they revile in others.

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