

Analysts: PAS needs 'reformers' to lead
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Islamic opposition party PAS needs its young turks to continue leading the party for the sake of its relevance in the Malaysian political scene and long-term succession, political analysts said today.

Their comments came ahead of the party's biennial elections which sees keen contest between conservatives led by deputy president hopeful and religious scholar Harun Taib against the 'reformers' led by incumbent Nasharuddin Mat Isa.

Political analyst Ibrahim Suffian said PAS delegates should bear in mind the party's dismal performance in the last general election in 2004 when they go to vote in the party polls tomorrow.

"Party delegates have to figure out whether they want a dakwah party that only preaches Islam or they want a party that can win in political arena," the director of independent opinion research firm Merdeka Centre told malaysiakini.

"At the end of the day, people need to make practical choice," Ibrahim stressed.

Young turks 'leading nowhere'

Young turks led by Nasharuddin swept to power at the last party polls in 2005 after PAS suffered a humiliating setback in the general election when it lost Terengganu and only retained Kelantan - which it has ruled since 1990 - by the brink.

Since then, the party has embarked on a re-branding exercise - from forming the new leadership which played down its intentions to set up an Islamic state to organising numerous programmes to reach out to youths and non-Muslims.

Party president Abdul Hadi Awang, a renown firebrand, also took a back seat in the leadership in order for his younger 'lieutenants' to lead.

But critics argued the reforms led by the younger professional leaders were heading nowhere. At the same time, the conservatives in the party felt the young pretenders were not preserving the ideals of the Islamic party, which still draw strong support from hardcore PAS grassroots members.

Ibrahim however countered that the 2004 general election results indicated the majority of Muslims in the country could not relate themselves to the PAS agenda which was "championed by the more conservative elements".

"PAS needs leaders who can articulate issues to the Malay fence-sitting voters who are not solely interested on issue of Islamic state but more concerned on practical issues like economy and corruption.

"People are looking at Kelantan as the yardstick whether PAS is capable of leading a government. So the question is do they want more Islam or practical development in

Kelantan?" he asked.

With a snap general election anticipated anytime soon, Ibrahim said it was critical for PAS to ensure it can retain Kelantan, failing which, its capability of rallying support for the party is cast in severe doubt.

Repeat of Hassan Shukri saga?

Apart from that, another question that will hang over the party's succession plan is what happens if Harun wins.

Political analyst Liew Chin Tong said it will be a setback for PAS should Harun, 64, defeats Nasharuddin, 44, in the contest.

"The two contenders are 20 years apart in terms of age, this age factor involves the future and image of PAS. If Harun wins, it will be a repeat of Hassan Shukri saga in the 2003 PAS election and the entire party's succession plan will be put under question," argued Liew.

In the 2003 party election, Hassan - who was nine years senior to president Abdul Hadi - won the No 2 post in that election and this subsequently led to various queries on the PAS successor plan. Abdul Hadi (photo) is 60 this year.

Liew said that Harun will have to address the question of how he can connect to the younger people and urban voters.

He added that Harun's stance was clear on the way he opposed a party-organised concert by popular singer Mawi in Kelantan.

Observers also noted that the younger generation of leaders can play a bigger role in forging a closer relationship with other opposition parties like PKR and DAP in facing the next general election.

In the democratic spirit

Former vice-president Mustafa Ali opined that the contest between the two factions only showed that democracy was alive in the party.

In the past the party has always resorted to its musyawarah (consultation) spirit to avoid contest in the party polls.

In the 2005 party elections, Mustafa - an influential figure in PAS - decided not to contest for any post in a signal to party members that the PAS leadership needed new blood to take over.

"That is still my principle but let it (this election) be a fair competition," Mustafa, who remains the PAS election director, told Malaysiakini.

The three-day muktamar or annual general meet of PAS will kick off tomorrow with some 1,000 delegates casting their votes in the afternoon. The results are expected to be announced on Sunday.

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