

PAS mulls future at crossroads
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The largest Islamic opposition party in the country began voting today for a key post that will help determine if it stays on a moderate track or reverts to a more fundamentalist line.

The vote reflects a growing debate on the dividing line between state and religion in Malaysia, a traditionally moderate Muslim nation run by a secular government.

The fight for the influential deputy leader's position at the PAS general assembly pits the "traditionalist and modernist" wings against each other, its secretary-general Kamaruddin Jaafar told AFP in an interview.

Incumbent Nasharuddin Mat Isa, who is seen as representative of a new breed of young professionals, faces a challenge from the party's religious division chief, Harun Taib.

"I cannot deny that there are voices in the party which represent the view that the party is moving too fast and modernising too fast," Kamaruddin said.

"They probably think that this should be slowed down or muted, by voting against those like Nasharuddin."

Nasharuddin, 45, a law graduate from the International Islamic University Malaysia, won the party position in 2005, beating an incumbent fundamentalist cleric.

His victory ushered in an era of more urbane party leaders after PAS was trounced in Malaysia's 2004 general elections, losing power in one state and only narrowly retaining Kelantan state in Malaysia's Muslim heartland.

It was seen as a vote against the party's fundamentalist approach to Islam, which includes a quest to turn Malaysia into a theocratic state under Islamic rule.

A change in image

Since then, PAS has tried to revamp its image and to capture support among Malaysia's ethnic Chinese and Indian communities.

The new generation of leaders, have aimed to widen its traditional support base from Malay Muslims to urban youth, and reached out to non-Muslims.

In Kelantan, PAS has lifted a 15-year ban on the popular games of snooker and billiards and allows cinemas to operate - although with the lights on to prevent any unseemly behaviour.

Kota Bharu itself is a bustling city. While most women dress conservatively and wear Islamic headscarves, there are no strict rules preventing males and females from mingling.

The largest group of traders in the market are Muslim women while the city centre has churches and a large Hindu temple.

"This is the reality of the state," Kamaruddin said. "Nobody gets beaten up or arrested if they

are not covered head-to-toe.

"Our idea of an 'Islamic state' is not to alienate other races and beliefs but include them and provide choices.

"Sadly, the very mention of the term raises all types of prejudices."

A total of 1,125 delegates are attending the PAS convention in Kota Bharu, capital of Kelantan.

Not a rosy picture

Results of the vote are expected Sunday, party officials said.

Party president Abdul Hadi Awang, a religious leader, will retain his post because he is unopposed, making the number two spot the key battleground.

Kamaruddin said he was not sure Nasharuddin could win.

"It does not really give an encouraging picture if he loses, especially to professionals who are either in the party, or quietly watching and supporting us on the outside," he added.

"It paints a picture that we are not progressing, that this modernist group is rejected by the party."

He said PAS still promoted the idea of an Islamic state but was restrained in its tactics amid concerns of a backlash.

A majority of Malaysians are ethnic Malay Muslims but the country also has significant populations of Chinese and Indians.

The party congress will also focus on preparations for general elections, which are expected by 2009.

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