

Moderates eye good general election run
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The main Islamic opposition party PAS today announced the re-election of a number of more moderate leaders as it prepares for an expected early general election.

The party elected a group of younger leaders in 2005 to revamp its image after it was trounced in a general election the year before, but has been struggling to regain popularity.

The election loss was seen as a vote against the fundamentalist party's conservative policies. The organisation aims to turn Malaysia into a theocratic state under Islamic rule.

In the results on Sunday, incumbent deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa was re-elected, while Husam Musa and Mohammad Sabu were also returned to two of three vice-president posts.

The results "show the delegates really wanted change in the party and that change should be done by the younger leaders," Nasharuddin, 45, told AFP.

All three are from a group of more urbane leaders of the party, one of Malaysia's largest with some 800,000 members.

The third vice-president's post was won by a member of the party's more conservative "ulama" wing, Ahmad Awang.

"The result will consolidate the line-up, not just between the ulama and the professionals but the young and the old," PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang told reporters.

Making inroads in Kedah

The party polls, held as part of PAS' general assembly in Kelantan, were seen as pitting the traditionalist and modernist wings against each other.

PAS controls Kelantan but it lost Terengganu state in the 2004 general election. Its seats in parliament were slashed from 27 to six after the election.

Since then, PAS has tried to capture support among Malaysia's ethnic Chinese and Indian communities and urban youth as part of a revamp.

Nasharuddin said the party would continue to try and win over minority non-Malay Muslim voters ahead of the general election.

"We are not just going to concentrate in the traditional Malay belt, Terengganu and Kelantan," he said.

"We are also trying to make inroads into many areas in Kedah, which has a mixture of Malay and non-Malays there. These are areas we think it is critical for us to have support from the non-Malay community," he said.

Malaysia must hold polls by early 2009, but an election is expected to be called before that.

Unchanged policies

Analysts said PAS would struggle to gain more voters as its policies had not changed, including its objective of turning Malaysia into an Islamic state.

"Whether you project it through the young professionals group or the old scholarly ulama, they both essentially agree there's going to be an Islamic state," said James Chin from the Malaysian campus of Swinburne University.

"That worries the Chinese ... The non-Muslim community will never accept a PAS Islamic state," the professor said.

Syed Ahmad Hussein, a professor at Universiti Sains Malaysia, said PAS would also make few gains among its key constituency of Malay Muslim voters.

"It will retain what it has or there will be a decline. There is no reason for voters to change their minds," Syed Ahmad told AFP.

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