

Divining the divine rules in Kelantan

The star - 15/1/2006.

BY SHAMSUL AKMAR

THOSE who were in the Pasir Mas district during the recent Pengkalan Pasir by-election would probably be able to confirm or deny tales that girls from the district are of enviable beauty.

It will not turn into a national debate for beauty, after all, is in the eye of the beholder.

But those who were in Kelantan after PAS took control of the state from Barisan Nasional in 1990 must have heard the jokes that were in abundance over the policies instituted by the new government to prove its Islamic credentials.

Among the first rules to be introduced was the requirement that all Muslim female employees of the state government must don the *tudung*, which PAS said it was duty-bound to impose as it was a divine decree.

Other rules were introduced, all justified to be in accordance with the teachings of Islam.

Among other things, they included *hudud* (Islamic penal code), ban on liquor, withdrawal of premise licences for gambling outlets and the ban on un-Islamic cultural shows such as the *wayang kulit* and *makyong*.

Some were quite ridiculous, such as gender-specific counters in supermarkets and lights on in cinemas when movies were showing.

There were also regular doses of advice given by Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, among them discouraging the womenfolk from wearing make-up at work.

These are all very interesting regulations. A large number of them centre on dissuading amorous men from getting too close to the opposite sex.

And the way to achieve this objective was by stopping the womenfolk from showing off their beauty or being in close proximity of men.

Outsiders, especially political parties that vehemently criticised PAS for instituting these rules, must have felt that they were unpopular policies, which were not to be imposed on the States they ruled.

It turned out that these policies did not deter voters from returning PAS to power in Kelantan in subsequent general elections — 1995, 1999 and 2004.

In fact, PAS even managed to win Terengganu in the 1999 election, and it introduced numerous policies, rules and regulations akin to neighbouring Kelantan.

Of course, it could be argued that PAS managed to remain in Kelantan and even win Terengganu due to its rival Umno's own undoing.

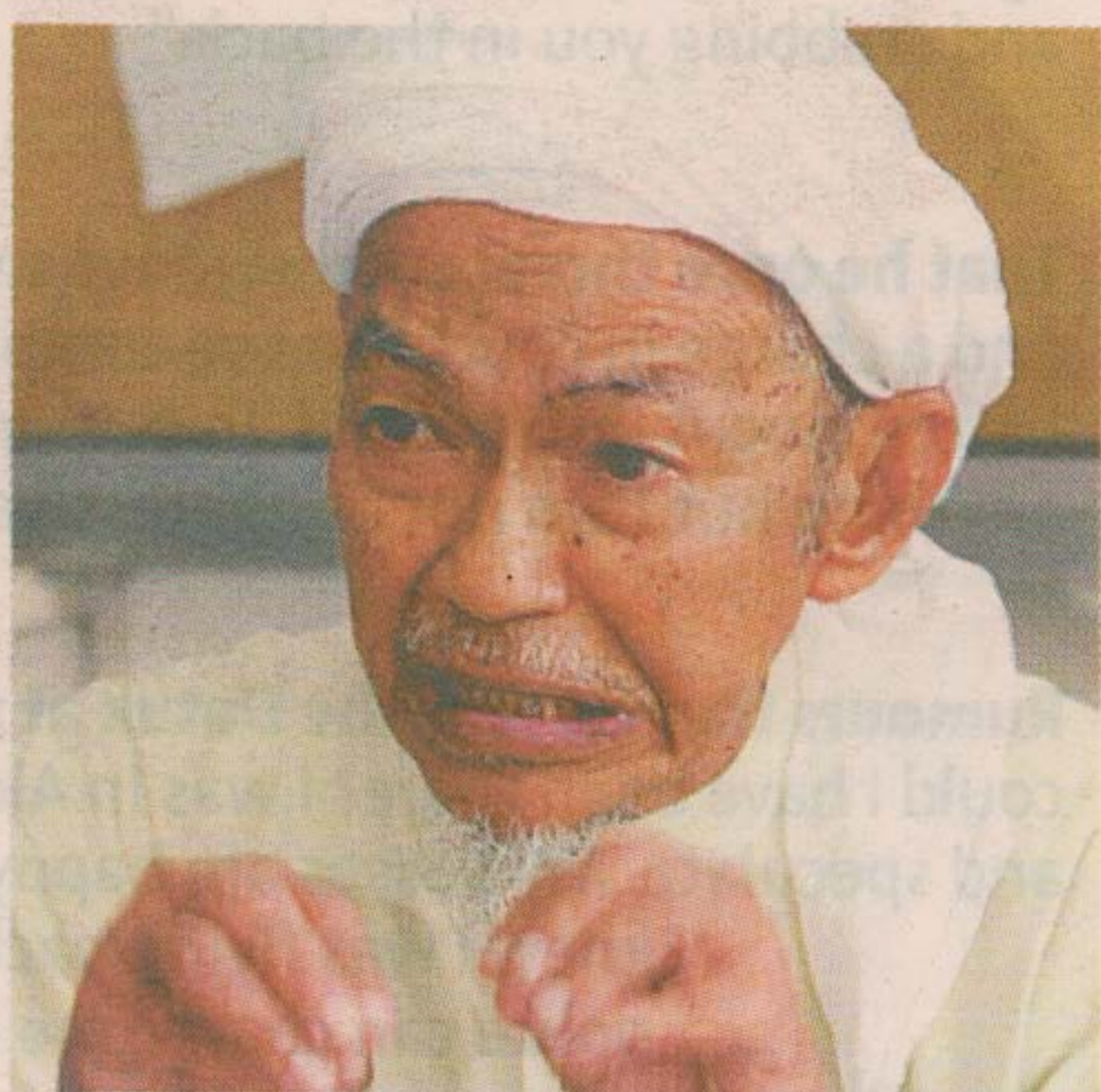
But that does not take away the fact that there are voters who are prepared to cast their ballot in favour of PAS despite its policies, which seemed to be undermining the rights of women.

The efficacy of PAS' policies in terms of garnering votes especially from the Malay Muslim populace was given further legitimacy by Umno when its leaders in some states started embarking on policies akin to that of PAS in Kelantan.

While what is seen as an Umno effort to out-Islamise PAS was going on, the 2004 general election changed the landscape.

PAS lost Terengganu and retained Kelantan by the skin of its teeth — securing 24 of the 45 State assembly seats.

PAS seemed to be pushed to the wall. It reacted quite swiftly, pronouncing wide-rang-



Nik Aziz: Discouraged women from wearing make-up to work.

ing changes in its policies and political approach.

In short, PAS discovered that its puritanical, conservative and at times hard-line policies were detrimental to its relevance in not only Malaysian politics but, more importantly, among the Malay Muslims.

With that, Mawi of the *Akademi Fantasia* fame ventured into Kelantan.

While PAS was still reeling from the results of the 2004 general election, the Pengkalan Pasir by-election must have sounded like a death knell as the loss of the seat to Umno further reduced PAS' hold on the state assembly, leaving it with a mere one-seat majority.

A one-seat majority is not any political party's cup of tea.

A month has passed, and there has been no real sign of any defection, at least not just yet. PAS has continued with its attempt to be moderate, its latest move being the lifting of the ban on snooker and billiard outlets.

But such calm can be truly misleading.

As political pundits await the political tempest, one aspect that seems to be ignored is, what will change if and when Umno regains Kelantan?

In terms of providing the development funds, there should be little doubt given the Federal support, and as was seen in Terengganu after the fall of PAS.

Of more interest would be the aesthetic values in terms of the rule of the state.

Will Umno do away with the policies that PAS instituted when it took over Kelantan? If Terengganu is to be used as an example, then not much can be expected to change in Kelantan if Umno does regain it.

Except maybe the less contentious rules such as the gender-segregated counters in supermarkets and the lights on in cinemas, that is, if PAS has not stopped enforcing them already.

The more contentious rules like the *hudud* and *tudung* requirement are unlikely to be touched.

These rulings, though strongly criticised by Umno when PAS instituted them, are unlikely to be revoked as it would incur the wrath of the Malay Muslim voters.

After all, the girls in Pasir Mas are still very attractive, with or without the *tudung*.

□ Shamsul Akmar has been a writer and a journalist of almost two decades. He writes on political Islam, Malay politics and regional and international issues.