

# Battle that could divide party

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**KOTA BARU:** The two most sought after Pas leaders in tomorrow's party elections have been the most coy about the contest ahead.

Despite being approached again and again, party deputy president Nasharudin Mat Isa and his challenger, ulama chief Datuk Harun Taib, refused to speak at length to reporters about their upcoming clash for the number two post in Pas.

Nasharudin drove here from Kuala Lumpur and arrived on Tuesday evening, checked into the Renaissance Hotel where many of the party leaders are staying, and spent most of the night finishing his opening speech for the Pas Youth convention.

Harun, meanwhile, is staying at the Hotel Raudah in another part of town.

He attended the party's central committee meeting yesterday and later huddled with a group of friends for a long lunch. But he too politely refused to talk to reporters.

Their reluctance to speak leaves many questions unanswered. But in the clash between the progressive Young Turks and the conservative old guard that Nasharudin and Harun



**Ulama chief Datuk Harun Taib**

respectively represent, one question matters above all else: How strong is each side?

The answer to that carries more significance than who wins or loses, and what is driving the keen interest in this year's contests.

A strong win by the Young Turks — an urbane team led by Nasharudin who swept to power in the last party polls two years ago — will shore up



**Incumbent Nasharudin Mat Isa**

their "repackaging" agenda of projecting a moderate and accepting image for Pas to expand the party's support base.

It will prove that the grassroots of the 800,000-strong party are still with them. Optimists feel this could, in turn, encourage the evolution of a more "mainstream" Pas.

But a win, or even narrow loss, by the old guard who privately (and

sometimes openly) oppose the new policies of their rivals — for instance the decision to bring in pop singer Mawi for a concert in Kelantan — could pave the way for the opposite: A dismantling of the Young Turks' agenda, and maybe even the return of a hard-line Pas inflexible when it comes to its Islamic state aspirations.

As things stand, the current leadership line-up voted in two years ago is clearly skewed in favour of the Young Turks.

Aside from deputy president Nasharudin, all three of the party's vice-presidents are also from the same team, as is nearly half of the 36-member central committee.

But not everyone down the line is happy with the way things have been going since the last party elections. Pas officials admit that there are grouses by those who feel the changes are not going anywhere, and that a small section of arch-conservatives is still very much against the changes, which to them mark a departure from Pas' original Islamic state goals.

Party sources unhappy with the Young Turks say Harun will secure all the votes which Nasharudin's challenger in the last party elections, Datuk Hassan Shukri, received.

He will also get the support of dele-

gates who agree with the younger leaders' agenda but feel that the deputy presidency should be given to the more charismatic Harun, who, they feel is better suited as the second-in-line to president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang.

One party figure, however, feels Nasharudin still has the upper hand, noting that he and his team have in the past two years managed to exert a very strong grip and influence the day-to-day running of Pas.

Both the Young Turks and their rivals hate to admit that a schism exists and that the stakes are clear-cut in this election.

What will count is how the largely rural and mainly conservative party grassroots vote. Their choice will signal what kind of Pas will be going into the next general election — one that will either be solidly united or increasingly divided.

An inconclusive result — say if Nasharudin loses but the Young Turk candidates retain the three vice-presidential posts — can spell trouble for Pas, for it could mean a long drawn out feud.

With the stakes so high, what both sides need is a strong and definite outcome. But that's something neither Nasharudin nor Harun are openly admitting at this point.