

Conservatives

out to make

comeback in PAS

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TWO years ago, in the wake of PAS's disastrous performance in the 2004 general election, the young Turks managed to edge out the conservative elements in the party and occupy important leadership positions.

This year, the conservatives – the vocal promoters and foremost agitators for Malaysia to become an Islamic state – are fighting hard to make a comeback.

Whether they get back their old influential and powerful driving seats will depend on how the 1,125 delegates assembled at the party education centre in Kota Baru vote today.

Leading the charge to oust the young leaders, who have been modernising the party as represented by the establishment of a spanking new headquarters in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, is *ulama* chief Harun Taib.

Except for the presidency, which is occupied by Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, all the other positions in the powerful central committee are up for grabs.

Incumbent deputy president, Nasharudin Mat Isa, who led the charge of the young men in 2005, is being challenged by the 64-year-old Harun.

Two young Turks and incumbent vice-presidents, senior Kelantan exco member Datuk Husam Musa and Mohamad Sabu, are defending their positions. A third, Datuk Dr Hassan Ali, has opted out.

Three others who are seeking to be vice-presidents are Datuk Ahmad Awang (information chief), Mahfuz Omar (former Youth chief) and Dr Mahfodz Mohamed (Johor PAS commissioner).

The results are likely to be announced only on Sunday, the last day of the party general assembly which began on Wednesday.

While the party tries to play down the intensity of the contest, observers see it as a culmination of the brewing differences between the old guard and the younger leaders.

Though the respected party president, Abdul Hadi, and its spiritual leader, Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat, have been staying above the fray, it is well known that they are happy with the current mix of professionals and *ulama* in the party leadership.

To most of the young members, their choice would be the more liberal Nasharudin, a former International Islamic University lecturer.

Harun, a Terengganu state assemblyman, has his supporters among those who prefer a more rigid Islamic outlook.

Some said it is a tough fight for Nasharudin, who wrestled the deputy presidency from veteran conservative Datuk Hassan Shukri two years back.

Conservatives are saying the deputy presidency would go to Harun as he is very influential and has a strong backing, especially from the people of Terengganu.

They pointed out that while many PAS members failed to be elected in the 2004 general election, Harun managed to win



Nasharudin (left), who led the charge of the young men in 2005, is being challenged by Harun.

in his constituency of Manir.

Others say a minus point for Harun will be the fact that he comes from the same state as Abdul Hadi.

Surely both the president and deputy president cannot come from the same state.

The response to this was "surely it is not wise for delegates not to vote for Harun just for this reason".

On the other hand, supporters of Nasharudin said a plus point for the incumbent deputy president is his open, flexible and progressive approach.

The former PAS secretary-general had

from the very beginning said he wanted to project a new image for the party through a rebranding and repackaging exercise.

He had a central role to play in the establishment of the new party headquarters in the city centre, just a shout away from the Umno headquarters.

The majority of the young members will support

Nasharudin because he is not as conventional or radical as Harun.

Supporters of Nasharudin say should Harun win, PAS moves to be seen as more open and liberal will suffer and so will its relationship with other opposition parties.

An outside observer, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia lecturer Prof Datuk Dr Shamsul Amri Baharuddin said the contest for the second most important post sends a significant signal to party leaders.

"What the members are saying, you can be liberal and open but not at the expense of sacrificing the party's main task.

"They want to remind the leaders of the party's primary objective of an Islamic state," he said.

However, Shamsul Amri said he does not think the young Turks are forgetting the old issues.

He said they are just being pragmatic. "For the young Turks, the immediate task is to win power because, once they are in power, then they can implement the party's main tasks," he said.

The professor said to win in elections, they must get public support and to get public support, they must be seen to be more open and liberal.

