

Old and the new square off

The Young Turks of PAS who blew in with the winds of change two years ago may find themselves under siege from the veterans who are trying to stage a comeback in the party elections on June 1.

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INSIGHT
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DURING a meeting of top PAS leaders at their new headquarters in downtown Kuala Lumpur recently, the discussion inevitably turned to the party elections.

Those seated around the table were asking each other whether they had been nominated for posts, with only a couple of weeks to go to the elections on June 1. But none of them were sure, not even secretary-general Datuk Kamaruddin Jaffar.

"You may find it hard to believe - we were asking each other what the other had heard," said Kamaruddin.

Strange but true! PAS politics is quite different from that of any other party.

Nominations for posts are a well-kept secret. Nominations from the divisions go directly into a padlocked box, with the key held by party election chairman Dr Sanusi Daeng Mariok.

No one, including Kamaruddin, would dream of asking Dr Sanusi about the nominations. If anyone did, all they would get is a frosty stare. The PAS election chief is tight-lipped, stern and quite unapproachable - and that's the way the party likes it.

Those nominated for posts were only notified yesterday.



Time for correction: Harun (speaking to reporters) has the backing of those uncomfortable with the Young Turks who were blown in by the so-called winds of change in the last polls.



Nasharudin: Intelligent but he did not come up the hard way.

Campaigning is also not encouraged, and those who do so risk being seen as ambitious and out-of-turn. It all sounds rather archaic but it is part of the party culture.

PAS does not discourage contests. And this year is likely to see another hot challenge for most posts.

Incumbent deputy president Nasharudin Mat Isa, who defeated arch-conservative Datuk Hassan Shukri two years ago, is likely to be challenged by another conservative, Datuk Harun Taib.

This will be the contest to watch because

Harun, who is from Terengganu, is considered a credible and sophisticated person.

Some are unhappy about the looming challenge, which they describe as "contesting for the sake of a contest".

But Harun has the backing of like-minded people in the party who are uncomfortable with the Young Turks who were blown in by the so-called winds of change in the last polls.

"He is a seasoned politician. He should offer himself," said a senior PAS politician from the east coast.

"If the last election was about change, then this one is about correction. Those who lost are probably trying to regain their influence and reassert themselves," said Merdeka Centre director Ibrahim Suffian.

The grouses of the old guard are wide-ranging. They were against the holding of the 2005 concert featuring Mawi, they are upset about toning down the Islamic state agenda, they are not keen on working with other opposition parties and they are even critical of the new party headquarters which will be launched by Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat tomorrow.

Veteran Ahmad Subky Latiff, a strident critic of the Mawi concert, dismissed the new multi-million ringgit headquarters as an "extravagance" and "a burden to members".

"I am only 50% happy with the party. I want to see the party survive and hold on to its ideals but the spirit of struggle in the party has not been this low in years," he said.

Subky may not represent the majority view but his dissatisfaction reflects the dilemma PAS is going through.

The old guard are single-minded. They believe the party must remain where it was and not compromise on the Islamic state agenda. They are also not interested in winning over the middle ground.

The Young Turks, or what one academic calls the "mainstreamers," are more forward-looking. They want the party to be more open and inclusive, consolidate on the gains made, expand the support base to the west coast and East Malaysia, and basically position PAS in national politics.

Both groups have the party's interest at heart but they are split in their approach.

"There is resentment among some of the veterans about the young leadership and the direction they are taking the party," said ulama and central committee member Mujahid Yusof.

The rivalry was very much in play in the 2005 party polls and it will be in play again this time around. As such, the polls may be a showdown of sorts between the two groups.

The influence of the conservatives cannot be under-estimated because a number of those seen to be pro-conservative have been winning positions at the division elections over the last two months.

For instance, Dr Siti Mariah Mahmud, who made history when she vied for one of the vice-president posts in 2005, recently failed to retain her Muslimat posts at both division and state levels.

But, said central committee member Datuk Muttalib Embong: "There isn't the sort of mood for change I saw two years ago. Our president is a top ulama and the deputy a religious scholar. They complement each other."

Nasharudin, despite what the conservatives may claim, has been a model No.2, filling in for functions which Hadi could not attend.

Hadi is mesmerising when he is at the pulpit but is incredibly bland as a politician.

And as Merdeka Centre's Ibrahim claimed, the Malay opposition leadership has passed to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim although PAS is the biggest Malay opposition party.

Nasharudin, on the other hand, has great people skills and is able to engage the public and the media in a way few PAS leaders can. He is intelligent, open to ideas and down to earth.

The conservatives' main claim against him is that he did not, like them, come up the hard way. Instead, he parachuted in during the *Reformasi* period and was made party secretary-general before he became No.2.

As such, he is not tested and experienced like, say, Harun who has been with PAS since the 1960s.

Some say Nasharudin needs such a contest to reaffirm his standing as deputy president. If he wins again, it will be smooth sailing in the years ahead.

Harun, currently head of the Dewan Ulama wing, has some hard choices to make: whether to stay on as Dewan Ulama chief or challenge Nasharudin.

He is also aware that delegates are not warm to the idea of both the No.1 and No.2 coming from Terengganu. Geography may seem rather old-fashioned in the Internet age but it is still a factor in PAS.

One person watching all of this very closely is former vice-president Datuk Mustafa Ali, one of the most influential people in the party today. When Mustafa declined to contest any posts in the last polls, he meant to tell those who had overstayed to make way for new blood.

He is deeply disturbed by the potential clash between Nasharudin and Harun. But he said he would not stop them nor would he initiate a *syurah* or consultative approach to resolving a contest.

"It only works when people genuinely want to find a solution," he said.

Party members know that they should be gearing up for an early general election.

But they will first have to successfully handle their own elections and resolve the rivalry between the old and the new.