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PAS dynamism restored

> 57th muktamar reflects new, more confident party, with reformists taking the helm



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IF THE late nationalist Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy - PAS's third president who did much to turn the Umno breakaway into a strong party with its own identity and ideology - were alive today, he would probably be pleased with this year's *muktamar*.

He would be happy to note that delegates to the *muktamar* had no qualms at all about criticising the *ulama* for their unwillingness to encourage progressive thinking among Muslims in the country.

One *ulama* who was lampooned was Perak Mufti Tan Sri Harussani Zakaria who was referred to as "poco-poco" *ulama* for banning the dance in the state but refusing to censure parties calling for a sex video allegedly depicting an opposition leader to be made public.

The different tenor of the debates appeared to indicate that some aspects of the Islamist-nationalist philosophy Burhanuddin had striven to propagate as the party's ideology were re-emerging and inspiring members to take the present course of de-emphasising ethnicity and the Islamic state agenda.

Burhanuddin had struggled to give the then fledgling party - with the names of many of its members still registered with Umno - character and strength to fight the mother party's efforts to re-absorb it. To his credit, in 1959 PAS captured Kelantan.

There was no talk of race or ethnicity then

and there was easy mixing between PAS leaders and leaders of the labour and socialist parties. Race was emphasised only under the leadership of Datuk Asri Muda.

As for the Islamic state agenda, it became part of the party struggle under Yusof Rawa who took over the party's leadership after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The agenda took a definite shape under Datuk Fadzil Noor and Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang who promoted the idea of leadership by the *ulama*. It was this agenda that had been the stumbling block to attempts at electoral understanding with other opposition parties, especially the DAP, to deny the ruling Barisan Nasional its dominance in the national legislature.

PAS gained new members and support following widespread protests against the sacking of deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim which the party capitalised on to win its most number of parliamentary seats - 27. Most of the new members, including those who joined after 2008, began to influence the party's leaders to stay with Pakatan Rakyat and to undertake reform to facilitate the smooth functioning of the grouping.

To these reform-minded members, which included professionals as well as *ulama*, it was time for the party to move on from a mere opposition party to being part of a governing group.

They were, of course, challenged by another group of members who prefer to be part of the existing ruling group - Umno or BN - to be achieved through a process touted as Malay unity.

Among those who flirted with the idea was

deputy president and *ulama* Nasharudin Mat Isa. It was clear to the reformists that he had to go. When it became apparent that he had the support of the conservative *ulama* in his bid to defend his position against Mohamad Sabu or Mat Sabu, another *ulama* - Datuk Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man - was persuaded to contest.

The *ulama* vote was split and firebrand and street-wise *non-ulama* won the deputy presidency for the first time. The reformists also won all the three vice-president posts and most of the central working committee seats.

The position of Abdul Hadi as president could have been affected but for the tradition that the president remain unchallenged. He had earlier on been seen as close to Nasharudin, something party spiritual leader Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat was not too pleased about.

Thus it came as no surprise to delegates that in his speeches he rejected completely unity with Umno. It was also a signal to delegates.

The Islamic state agenda was mentioned but much downplayed. It is expected to be on the backburner until it is allowed to fade away or until such time when the party is ready to review its position in the party struggle. Coming close to a general election, there is fear that rural voters may misunderstand.

Malay unity talk was fiercely criticised by the delegates, many of whom said it was aimed at benefiting only Umno and the BN.

"Why share the Malay votes with Umno when we can compete and win them all," a delegate said yesterday, reflecting that a new and more confident party had emerged from the 57th *muktamar*.