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Courting Pas

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NEW REALITY: Umno, Pas may close ranks as battle for the Malay heartland heats up

IN his book on the study of Pas between 1951 and 2013, scholar Dr Farish A. Noor concluded that the Islamic party is now confronted with the new socio-political reality in Malaysia.

The situation may prompt it to make choices that would determine its future form and outlook, he wrote, adding that Pas, with history behind it and ample examples to choose from, can go in a number of directions.

The calls for Malay-Muslim unity remain resonant, he said. And, this is evident in the recent unity rally for the Rohingya that brought Pas and Umno leaders together.

As early as 2013, Pas leader Nik Mohamad Abduh Nik Abdul Aziz (the son of the late Pas spiritual leader Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat) had called for the party to work with the Umno/Barisan Nasional government to curb the conversion of Muslims by liberals and secularists.

But, as Farish noted, the different discourses within Pas will succeed or fail according to how they resonate with the wider realities of the country, and the social-institutional-economic structures of Malaysia, as well.

One of Pas's immediate tests as a

political party will be the next general election, which many people expect Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak will call sooner rather than later.

What is clear: the next election will be about the battle for the crucial rural Malay votes, with Umno, Pas and a host of their splinter parties going after the same seats.

It is no secret that the personal relationship between Najib and Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang is warm and cordial. Both respect each other highly.

The close ties go beyond the two leaders. When Pas spiritual leader Datuk Dr Haron Din passed away in San Francisco, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi offered to arrange for an aircraft to fly Haron's remains to Malaysia.

Haron's family said they were touched by the offer. He was buried near San Francisco.

The latest sign of closer Umno and Pas cooperation was over the private member's bill proposed by Hadi to empower the syariah court in meting out sentences.

Najib said he would meet BN leaders over the motion to ensure they had a clear understanding of the purpose of the amendment.

He stressed that the amendment was not a back door to hudud, and would apply only to Muslims.

Hadi brought forth a motion on

the private member's bill to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965, or better known as Act 355, at the Dewan Rakyat on Nov 24.

Najib also said the relationship between Umno and Pas, which had been strained, was improving, including at the grassroots level.

Umno information chief Tan Sri Annuar Musa has, however, hinted at some form of "coalition" with Pas. The mention of cooperation between the two parties has been repeated by both sides of this Malay political divide.

Recently, Pas leaders denied any coalition with Umno. But, Pas is also clear that it will not be in a coalition with any group that cooperates with DAP.

Apparently, under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's premiership, Act 355 had been amended in 1988 without much fanfare and vocal opposition from within and outside BN.

But this time around, it has become so controversial and has been spun for political reasons.

Dr Mahathir has been exceptionally silent on Act 355 these days, as the former premier-turned-opposition leader is trying to win over Pas to his new opposition party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM).

According to one blogger, 91-year-old Dr Mahathir has been more open about his liberal stance on Islam to reach out to his daughter Marina Mahathir's friends in liberal non-governmental organisations and G25 for political support.

"A glimpse of Dr Mahathir's liberal tendencies lies in his past argument, to question the many interpretations of Islamic practices, and blaming the ulama, as authority and interpreter of Islam, for the divisiveness," the blogger wrote.

Returning to the Malay vote bank, it is an open secret that Pakatan Harapan, with its new partner,

PPBM, believes it is able to break Umno's dominance in rural seats and capture Malay votes to win federal power.

The plan is for Dr Mahathir and PPBM to win rural Malay votes, while fellow Pakatan members PKR and DAP win urban and suburban voters.

That is the plan.

But, veteran leaders, such as Tun Musa Hitam, think that the power of incumbency, Umno's long dominance in rural areas, and superior resources and machinery might still sway voters in favour of BN.

One other thing that could work in Umno's favour is the disarray within the opposition ranks.

"Since 2008, I don't think the opposition has been doing better," he told a forum at the International Islamic University last week.

"If Umno can concentrate on Malays in rural areas and get their support, you can get the numbers. The leadership has shown so much interest in rural areas as though there is no tomorrow.

"Umno could turn out to be the winner because of the disunity within the opposition, with every party going for the same seat.

"One seat (to be contested) for one opposition party is easier said than done."

A likely Umno-Pas electoral pact could dictate the polls outcome for BN. Either way, Umno must improve its standing in its traditional seats.

Pas, after all, is in an enviable position, with both sides of the political divide courting the party ahead of the polls. How the Islamic party responds will determine the results of the upcoming election and the fate of the 65-year-old party.

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A veteran newsman, Jailil believes that a good journalist should be curious and sceptical at the same time

