

**PAS dons coats over robes to hone electoral image**  
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**By Mohd Farhan Darwis**

KUALA LUMPUR, April 12 — Once known as the party of white skullcaps, turbans and robes, PAS has undergone a socio-political change that has helped sharpen its Islamist credentials in order to stay relevant and acceptable to a plural society.

Several PAS leaders acknowledged the firebrand party had shed its hardline, conservative shell and told The Malaysian Insider they were proud they had leaders who were willing to metamorphose for the sake of the party's continuity.

"The strength of the leadership of clerics is now supported by the strength of the professionals and activists... this makes PAS respected by friend, and feared by foes," said Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad, executive director of PAS's research centre.

Unlike other political parties in Malaysia, PAS has been openly religious from the start of its formation in 1951. Decisions within the party are made not only by a central political council but also by its Majlis Syura — a council of clerics consisting of trained Islamic scholars — that powers the heart of PAS.

A former lecturer of medicine in Universiti Sains Malaysia, Dr Dzulkefly said the changes in PAS have helped the party stay "fresh" without compromising its religious principles.

"PAS has emerged as the face and image of a contemporary Islamic political body and it is refreshing... it is now an Islamic movement that is facing the challenge and brings dynamism to the fight," said the academic-turned-politician who won public office in Election 2008.

Since last year, PAS, a founding partner in the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) opposition pact, has been seen actively recruiting former senior civil servants and even businessmen. It has also selected some of them to run for public office in the May 5 polls.

Among them are former director of the police criminal investigation department, Datuk Fauzi Shaari, who has been named to stand in the Larut parliamentary seat.

Architect and building specialist, Datuk Raja Kamarul Bahrin Shah Raja Ahmad, was also recently named as a candidate for the Kuala Terengganu federal seat. There is also corporate figure Datuk Abdul Rahman Maidin who has been selected for the Tasik Gelugor federal seat in Penang.

The party has also set up a PAS Supporters' Club to field non-Muslim candidates in Election 2013. Its president, Hu Pang Chow, a Chinese Christian, has been picked to stand in Ayer Hitam, Johor.

"We need to prove that we have qualified candidates to capture Putrajaya," said PAS deputy president Mohamad Sabu, who added the party would place more corporate figures to clean up Putrajaya.

Political pundits also see the evolution in PAS as a worldwide phenomenon, such as how renowned Islamic organisation, Egypt's Ikhwanul Muslimin, picked Mohammed Morsi, an

engineer, to be its chairman.

"It's a positive sign to the party, because with a changed image, it's no longer known only as a party of white kopiah and 'jubah'," said political analyst Asri Salleh, using the Malay terms for skullcaps and the ankle-length loose robes popularly associated with PAS members.

"On the contrary, the participation of former government servants, lawyers, doctors and so on will certainly bring their image into PAS and at once, the people will see PAS's new image," said the lecturer from Universiti Teknologi MARA based in Terengganu.

Apart from seeing the evolution that has enabled PAS to be part of the PR pact, Asri was concerned that the metamorphosis would affect the party's original supporters who had fought for a different policy and goal.

"Maybe their early supporters... during the reign of the clerics in PAS, some would be dissatisfied and will leave the party," he said.

Asri said that if that happened, PAS would lose its influence and the vote from those early supporters.

"However, it is normal for political parties to change... if Barisan Nasional has its transformation, PAS has its evolution."

The party's Federal Territory deputy commissioner, Ahmad Zamri Asa'ad Khuzaimi, said PAS's openness has caused the people and professionals to choose to be with PAS.

"We evolve but do not compromise on policy... our policy is clear and they who are not aligned to that policy will usually leave the party, but supporters are still loyal to the party," said the lawyer who is also in the party's legal and human rights department, referring to several prominent personalities who have left.

"We are open; in fact, the president has also been reprimanded in the congress," the 38-year-old said, referring to Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang.

"We are strict and have principles," he added.

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