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A Defeated PAS Moves to put on a Multicultural Face

By Terence Chong

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THE proposal by Malaysia's opposition party, PAS (Parti Islam SeMalaysia), to extend party membership to non-Muslims reminds us that while it may be down, it certainly isn't out. The political co-option of non-Muslims is, of course, not new. The Muslim caliphate's rule from North Africa to parts of Pakistan in the eighth century, for example, would not have been possible if the caliphs had not engaged in a policy of political conciliation and engagement with local communities.

But as historian Eric Hobsbawm once mused, history never repeats itself. PAS' proposal is less an enlightened re-enactment of the past, than a signal that the political party has begun to respond to the lessons of its electoral defeat in March this year, which taught PAS to move beyond its traditional rural support base to seek broader appeal.

Admitting non-Muslims, and by implication, non-Malay members, may be PAS' stab at multiculturalism, but this does not mean it will cease its push for an Islamic state and gradual implementation of syariah laws and hudud punishments - because these are still valuable political weapons against Umno.

A multicultural face, nonetheless, may serve two purposes. Firstly, it will soften its public image as a hardline, conservative political-religious organisation, and enable the party to thwart accusations of ethnocentrism. Secondly, it will be seen to be abiding by enlightened Islamic doctrines that teach cultural tolerance and social harmony. This move



is especially important for redeeming itself in the eyes of the thousands of moderate Muslim voters who shunned the party in March.

The popular support PAS enjoyed in 1999 failed to manifest itself in this year's election largely because anger over the Anwar Ibrahim affair and Umno infighting translated into PAS votes in 1999, and when this anger subsided this year, so too did PAS' appeal. Given the nature of transient loyalties, PAS realises that it must expand beyond its rural enclaves and utilise multicultural rhetoric in cosmopolitan Malaysia.

The inclusion of non-Muslims also allows PAS to reach out to urban voters. The party's traditional ulamas have thus far failed to tap into the aspirations and lifestyles of the young urban middle class. A 31-year-old overseas-educated Malaysian Muslim friend tells me that PAS 'hits you with a big, crude stick in order to get its message across. To younger educated Muslims, this is a huge turn-off'.

With the Internet, e-mail and SMS fast becoming channels for information dissemination and political mobilisation, PAS needs non-Muslim members who can be useful human nodes within non-Malay communities and networks. Furthermore, harnessing contemporary technologies and adapting to urban lifestyles are more pressing now, given the government's curbs on ceramah (political gatherings), PAS' traditional means of propaganda dissemination.

Having non-Muslim members also means that PAS, too, can play the 'progressive' card which Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi wielded to great effect with his Islam Hadhari, a pro-development and progressive brand of Islam which effectively nullified PAS' uncompromising stance in March.

Islam Hadhari has been well- received largely because it allows Muslims to reclaim their religiosity and piety without having to take up anti-Western or anti-modern positions. The manoeuvre has also been politically convenient for Umno as it conducts preliminary free-trade agreement talks with the United States.

Ordinary Malaysians realise that a progressive and harmonious Malaysia is an example for troubled Muslim countries elsewhere in the region and the world. In order to save itself from irrelevance, PAS has to be seen to be 'progressive'.

But the inclusion of non-Muslim members is by no means any guarantee of success for PAS. Firstly, non-Muslim members, if admitted, will most likely enjoy lower membership status. Polls by PAS' newspaper, Harakah, show that only 13 per cent of respondents favour granting full membership status to non-Muslims while 53 per cent prefer granting them associate membership. From PAS' point of view, this is necessary if it wants to avoid any internal disagreement over its mission to create an Islamic state in Malaysia.

Secondly, a proposal to admit non-Muslims in 1999 was rejected because of entrenched ideological attitudes of some party leaders. That refusal to admit non-Muslims at the

height of the party's popularity suggests that its newfound multiculturalism is nothing more than useful rhetoric now that the party is in the doldrums.

Having non-Muslims in the party may, however, restrain PAS leaders from promising slices of heaven in exchange for voting loyalty in the future.

Thirdly, in its efforts to woo the votes of Chinese or Indian voters, PAS will find itself outflanked by the Democratic Action Party. It is unlikely that its move to include non-Muslim members alone will make PAS more attractive to non-Malays.

Nonetheless, PAS' latest proposal remains interesting: It is a sign that the party is beginning to see the need to re-invent itself.

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