

## More complicated than clerics v professionals

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*The Straits Times*, 8 June 2009

In many ways, last week's 55th general assembly (or muktamar) of the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) was a continuation of its assembly last year. One of the most hotly debated issues last August was the revelation that senior party leaders had been in talks with the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), the party's arch-nemesis and competitor for the Malay-Muslim vote.

Because party elections were looming, the media quickly reported that battle lines had been drawn between the so-called ulama (cleric) and professional camps. At the heart of this contest was the evidently unresolved issue of the controversial 'unity talks' with Umno.

Mr Husam Musa, a PAS vice-president and erstwhile supporter of deputy president Nasharudin Mat Isa, announced that he will challenge the incumbent for the post on the grounds that he staunchly opposed the unity talks that Mr Nasharudin had led on the instruction of the party's majlis shura (consultative council). Rounding off the three-cornered contest was Mr Mohamad Sabu, or 'Mat Sabu' as he is affectionately called, who also opposed the unity talks.

Soon after the March 2008 general election, when the Umno-led Barisan Nasional coalition lost an unprecedented five states to the opposition and its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority, then-Umno leader and Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi extended an olive branch to PAS. The overtures, couched as Malay unity talks, were accepted by PAS.

Curiously, the decision to talk to Umno was made during a meeting at which Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the spiritual leader of PAS, was apparently absent. PAS' decision to accede to Umno's request stemmed from two concerns. First, certain segments within PAS were concerned that deepening cooperation with its allies in the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat might force the party to compromise its Islamic agenda. Second, PAS' Selangor branch was allegedly unhappy that the party's central leadership had allowed coalition partner Parti Keadilan Rakyat instead of a PAS candidate to fill the post of chief minister in the state. Among the issues discussed at the Umno-PAS dialogue, it seems, was the possibility of cooperation in Selangor.

But when news of the talks broke, they were roundly opposed by the PAS rank and file, though party stalwarts like president Abdul Hadi Awang and deputy spiritual leader Harun Din defended the dialogue. Mr Nasharudin was seen as the personification of the unpopular talks, and it was widely thought that he would suffer the consequences last week.

Indeed, right until the last minute, speculation was rife that Mr Husam had won the election. As it turned out, however, Mr Nasharudin won, and with an impressive margin for a three-way fight.

Two factors accounted for Mr Husam's defeat. For starters, he was handicapped by the fact that it was a three-cornered contest. Also, though Mr Husam is widely seen as Mr Nik Aziz's protege, the hugely popular spiritual leader had not openly endorsed his candidacy.

Second, by caricaturing the elections as an 'ulama versus professionals' contest, the media in effect painted Mr Husam into a corner. Rather than focus on the straightforward issue of

cooperation with Umno, the media billed the contest as one between two clearly polarised camps when in fact the lines were far murkier. After all, though Mr Nasharudin is himself an ulama, he was once touted as the leader of the professionals. Also, a not insignificant number of non-ulama PAS members had been sympathetic towards, if not outright supportive of, the unity talks. Further muddying the categories, Mr Nik Aziz, the chief among the ulama, had himself come out squarely to oppose cooperation with Umno.

In other words, the situation was far more complicated than the media portrayed it to be. Yet by pitting the ulama against the professionals, the media created the impression that ulama leadership was being threatened. Given that the party's membership holds the ulama in high regard, it is hardly surprising that it closed ranks by supporting Mr Nasharuddin.

To be sure, his victory does not mean that PAS is about to explore ways and means of cooperating with Umno. Indeed, Mr Nasharudin himself declared during the assembly that PAS would no longer pursue this matter. Likewise, Mr Husam's defeat in no way signals the end of the road for the reformists in PAS.

But the elections did raise a raft of issues - such as transparency, the role of the ulama in leadership as well as relations with allies and adversaries - that the party will have to grapple with. These issues are likely to surface again even as PAS continues to nurse ambitions of becoming a truly national Malaysian party.

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