

PAS CONVENTION 2010

# Non-Muslims can run for polls under PAS flag

Islamic party's latest move will extend its reach significantly into groups 'it couldn't win before'

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**KOTA BARU, (Kelantan):** Malaysia's Islamic party yesterday took another step to attract non-Muslims. It will now allow candidates of any faith to run for election under its banner.

The decision was announced by Datuk Seri Hadi Awang, president of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), soon after he delivered the opening speech at the party's annual *muktamar* (convention).

"Majlis Syura has decided to allow our party symbols to be used by non-Muslim candidates," he told a news conference, referring to the consultative council consisting of senior ulamas (clerics) in the party.

The move to attract more non-Muslims to run un-

der the banner of the one-million strong PAS party could prove significant. The party's election machinery - from the hanging of flags on lamp posts to the organisation of political rallies and the distribution of pamphlets - is arguably the best in Malaysia.

The decision came at the same convention where the party is admitting members of the PAS Supporters Congress as delegates for the first time. The congress claims 20,000 non-Muslims as members.

The latest decision "extends PAS' reach into communities that it could not win before", said Ms Bridget Welsh, associate professor in political science at the Singapore Management University, who is in Kota Baru for the *muktamar*.

In the 2008 general election, PAS leaders were caught in a bind when a non-Muslim Indian woman, Ms Kumutha Raman, said she wanted to run under the party's banner.

The PAS Constitution states that only Muslims can be members, so it could not admit her or allow her to use its flag, which depicts a white full moon against a dark green background.

Ms Kumutha, a member of the PAS Supporters



Parti Islam SeMalaysia president Datuk Seri Hadi Awang inspecting the guard of honour before opening the party's annual convention yesterday. PHOTO: THE STAR/ASIA NEWS NETWORK

Club before the group became a party wing last month, eventually ran under the Parti Keadilan Rakyat banner. She lost, but her wish to stand under the PAS banner woke up party chiefs to the idea of working with non-Muslims who share PAS' political stance on issues, if not ideology.

As a measure of how big the step was for the conservative Islamic party, the party chiefs had to refer the decision on allowing non-Muslims to run under its banner to the Majlis Syura.

This consultative council consists of senior Islamic scholars who provide theological backing for the party's moves and it includes Malaysia's foremost faith healer, Datuk Haron Din.

"What we have done is to show our openness towards non-Muslims and raise the status of what was the PAS Supporters Club," said party vice-president Mahfuz Omar.

The 59-year-old party is at its strongest point in its history, with 23 Parliament seats, and has formed an alliance with the main opposition parties to control four of Malaysia's 13 state assemblies.

PAS and its Pakatan Rakyat alliance now have hopes of capturing federal power in Putrajaya in the 2013 general election, which helps explain the party's more open policy towards non-Muslims.

Datuk Seri Hadi in his speech asked party members to continue cooperating with other parties. But several delegates who spoke after his speech reminded PAS not to abandon its Malay voter base in its new quest to woo non-Muslims.

Seen from a wider perspective, PAS has moved closer to the middle ground since the turbulent late-1970s and early 1980s.

During the infamous *kafir mengkafir* (calling others infidels) episode, a young fiery cleric named Hadi Awang branded Umno as "infidels" for working with non-Muslims to rule the country, saying it was against Islamic teachings.

Today, that same cleric, Datuk Seri Hadi, is the party president. And now he is earnestly wooing non-Muslims, even as Umno seems to have gone backwards by pandering to more narrow Malay interests.

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