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DAP, two years after 'reform or die' pledge

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THE past few days have seen some DAP leaders walking around looking rather pleased, thanks to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Even the PM acknowledges our role," says Kota Melaka MP Lim Guan Eng when met in Parliament.

Lim and his colleagues have in mind, of course, Dr Mahathir's speech at a recent dinner to mark his receipt of the Jawaharlal Nehru Award and the King Faisal International Award.

Not only did the Prime Minister include the opposition leaders among those whom he credited as the "true recipients" of the awards, but he noted that the Opposition here "does not oppose the Government until it causes violence".

That the DAP should now be so appreciative of recognition from someone whom they used to label "Enemy No 1" at their ceramah is interesting and even revealing of the state of Malaysia's vocal and on-the-ball opposition party.

The party was badly stunned by the losses suffered in the 1995 general election which saw its parliamentary seats shaved from 20 to nine while its share of the popular vote slipped from 17.6 per cent to 12.1 per cent.

It must be a terrible feeling to be abandoned when times are good, to have so little to show after almost 30 years in politics.

And that may explain why the Prime Minister's words of acknowledgement are being equated to a testimony (of sorts) that they have not failed after all.

Going by the declarations made in the aftermath of its electoral losses, the DAP is supposed to be going through a period of reform and change.

But, this has been more of theory than practice in most States where the party enjoys a presence.

In fact, party veteran Dr Chen Man Hin, a septuagenarian with old world manners and known in the party for his scrupulous honesty, let out a spontaneous laugh when asked how the party reform was getting along.

Then, he checked himself and, in a tone more in keeping with his status as party chairman, said: "It's a very, very uphill task."

DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang, who had so dramatically made that stirring cry of "reform or die", declined to be interviewed.

This seasoned politician, known for his fire-and-brimstone oratory, seems almost reticent these days.

He lets his men take the limelight in parliamentary debates while the National Press Club, which has invited him for a dinner talk, has been kept waiting for a date for months.

But that does not mean he is lying low. A quick perusal of the party's homepages showed that he issued 46 statements between Feb 16 and March 29 which works out to an average of about one a day.

Then again, his Press statements are often political rhetoric although his latest allegations about the Selangor Menteri Besar's Gold Coast affair is riveting, to say the least.

As in any political party, reform is easier said than done. The party's call for young, qualified Malaysians to join its ranks has had minimal response.

The economic boom has not only drawn support and votes to the policies of the ruling party but also meant that young adult Malaysians are busy staking their claim to material success.

Opposition politics is definitely not a part of that pie. Opposition parties do not have the advantage of patronage and connection that draw people like bees to honey in other parties.

But political education director Teng Chang Khim claims that in Selangor, where he is party secretary, the party has managed to attract young graduates and professionals.

"This branch will carry out special projects," says Teng, who is also Bukit Gasing State Assemblyman.

Perhaps, the party loyalist most insistent that there is a reform programme is Kepong MP Dr Tan Seng Giaw.

Dr Tan, who has the rather interesting habit of driving around his constituency speaking through a loudhailer, rambled on about how the party is preparing for the coming millennium and how its foray into IT (information technology) was proof of readiness to change with the times.

Indeed, the DAP's embrace of IT is impressive and, according to a regular net-surfer, boasts one of the better-designed and up-to-date homepages put up by local political parties while Lim Kit Siang is, arguably, among the better-informed MPs on IT.

The secretary-general, from very early on, caught on to the usefulness of the Internet as a useful medium of uncensored party propaganda albeit for a limited audience.

And recently, his son Guan Eng who is deputy secretary-general and youth chairman, organised a well-attended IT conference.

But it would need a lot of persuasion to be convinced that DAP's IT programme is part of the structural reform talked so passionately about by rank and file a few years ago.

Former DAP MP Dr Kua Kia Soong, in his controversial booklet Inside the DAP, 1990-1995, identified several areas requiring structural reform.

Among them was the "Chinese image" of the party; its "permanent opposition" image; its hazy political ideology even among party leaders; no system in selection of candidates for election; and inability to get the party message across to the public.

And there was the problem of what Kua perceived as Lim Sr's "big boss" hold on the party.

Some of Kua's suggestions are pertinent and quite within the control of the party to amend but, given the circumstances surrounding his resignation, it is doubtful that they will ever be considered.

Kua's tell-it-as-it-is book is seen by party loyalists as a "betrayal of trust".

In fact, Dr Tan's reply to inquiries about Kua's book was sardonic: "Who is Kua Kia Soong?"

Among party leaders, there is this attitude of not washing political linen in public.

For instance, although it is well-known that few dare stand up to the secretary-general at CEC meetings, most of them will vehemently deny that he is domineering.

The secretary-general's style is a sensitive issue, so much so, that a Thomas Jefferson quote - "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God" - which leads off the Rocket Press homepage, has been read as a reference to personalities within the party.

Several, like Teng are quick to defend him: "He is not a tyrant."

Teng, who was the elder Lim's political secretary for three years before leaving to complete his law studies, insists that "if people dare not speak up, they should not blame Kit Siang".

"I feel quite free to disagree and argue with him."

According to Dr Chen, "we are not afraid of him, but respectful of his views," while publicity head Wee Choo Keong says that "no political

parties are immune to problems but I'm sure we can find solutions in a mature way."

But, discontent in a political party often arises not out of lofty issues like whether the party is democratically run or whether decisions are made collectively.

Rather, it boils down to nitty-gritty things like position and post.

Thus, the rapid rise of Lim Jr within the party ranks and the fact that he has surrounded himself with a loyal clique of second echelon leaders has created resentment.

They call him the "crown prince", a term which he seems to find highly uncomfortable although he is the clear frontrunner to date.

To be fair to the party, the majority of DAP MPs play their role in Parliament to varying degrees; even the Barisan Nasional MPs admit that.

Also, the issues it has taken up in the last few years have gone beyond what are seen as "Chinese issues." It has represented Malays in land disputes while it was the DAP that Pendek Ahmad, the grandmother of Malacca's most controversial underage girl, turned to for help.

Still, it has a long way to go in finding acceptability among the Malays.

For instance, when the party hit the ceramah circuit with Pendek in tow, the touring delegation encountered hostile Malays in Ipoh.

An Umno man later told one of them that the Malays simply could not accept the fact that "a Malay (Pendek) would work with the DAP".

The DAP's unbridled championing of Chinese issues such as Chinese education has ingrained in Malay minds that it is a Chinese chauvinist party.

Unsurprisingly, they blame the mainstream media for their image.

In the meantime, few inside or outside the party really believe that "reform", as is normally understood by the word, has taken place or will take place.

The DAP has survived defeat in the past and there is no reason why it will not survive this one, with or without reform.

In fact, it is already looking ahead to the next national polls.

Or as the younger Lim puts it in his dramatic way: "The next general election will be the benchmark to determine whether the opposition has a meaningful role to play in Malaysian democracy."

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