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Keng Yaik shows he is in charge but racial mix a thorny issue

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AFTER last year's Gerakan national delegates conference, which was marked by internecine strife leading to a challenge for the presidency, some had predicted that the scars would not heal.

Others had said the party was headed towards a rift in its ranks.

This year's conference, which was opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at Wisma PGRM on Saturday, showed otherwise.

It gave the impression that Gerakan members are sensible and disciplined and that Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik will continue to command the Barisan Nasional component for some time yet.

The challenge mounted by Joseph Chong for the presidency is now a closed chapter.

Delegates showed maturity in their debates with many of them speaking in Bahasa Malaysia. The speeches of those who spoke in Chinese dialects were translated immediately.

Many demonstrated language prowess and some even were game to speak in Bahasa Malaysia even though they were not as fluent.

It showed the Chinese in the party were beginning to feel at home debating in Bahasa Malaysia. The spirit of acceptance was present.

One reason for the greater discipline and better performance must surely be the fact that this year's conference was opened to the Press.

In fact, Dr Lim himself, in winding up the debate on the presidential address, remarked that the decision to open the proceedings to the Press had proven beneficial.

Of course, the delegates had been told what to expect and that under no circumstances should they tarnish the image of the party. They were given guidelines on behaviour.

The debate was dominated by the problems of privatisation: specifically rising toll and utility charges.

The other major topic was the defeat of the Gerakan candidate to the DAP in the Teluk Intan parliamentary by-election on May 17.

The delegates also touched on the manner in which some local government officials handled sensitive issues such as religious festivals and functions. This was also cited as a cause of the by-election defeat.

Almost all the participants were unhappy with the direction the privatisation process was taking as they felt it was burdening the people.

The tone was set by Dr Lim himself when, in his presidential address, he touched on the lessons to be learnt from the defeat.

A major reason for the defeat, he said was "what many perceive to be rising costs caused, in part, by price increases by privatised entities."

From then on there was no stopping the delegates. It was not only debated in the hall but also during coffee breaks. Some said there was no significant improvement in the services provided by several of these companies.

Clearly they were frustrated and the conference proved the right avenue for voicing this.

In this, the party has managed to feel the pulse of the people: there is a general feeling of dissatisfaction over the increasing charges.

It is significant that on top of the list of resolutions was the one calling on the Government "not to allow liberal increases in prices for services charged by erstwhile public, now privatised, entities."

The resolution urged the Government to set targets for productivity

increases by these companies; audit their performance to ensure every effort was made to achieve these targets and that shortfalls between real and targeted productivity were not used as an excuse to raise prices.

Dr Lim's ability to command his audience with his wit, gesticulations and loud voice was not matched by any other leader of the party. And he made sure his message, in simple Bahasa Malaysia, got through.

A thorn in the side of the leadership - the party's lack of a multiracial look despite its avowed multiracial principles - was also debated.

There are only two non-Chinese in the central committee and both are Indians - Rhina Bhar (Wanita wing deputy president) and Dr S. Vijayaratnam.

The fact remains that Gerakan has failed to attract more non-Chinese and no matter how high-sounding its philosophy, it cannot escape being labelled a Chinese party.

And the few Indians occupying posts will continue to be regarded as "mere window-dressers".

When the party started, it had formidable Malay and Indian leaders. Today there are hardly any.

Delegate John Fernandez of Negri Sembilan put it nicely when he said: "Our Constitution states that the Gerakan is multiracial but people are saying that it is a Chinese party with Indian window dressing. We used to have a bit more colour in our leadership."

Dr Lim made fun of the issue, saying that colour could always be added. Looking at Wanita leader Datuk Kee Phaik Cheen, he suggested that she dye her hair in several colours and then told a Sikh participant to wear a colourful turban at the next conference.

It didn't go down well with those who felt that Dr Lim, more than the younger leaders, should have known better than to treat the issue lightly.

"He should realise that for some people, the fact that the Gerakan, with an overwhelmingly large Chinese base, calls itself a multiracial party is a joke," said one.

The Gerakan does have a serious image problem and the sooner Dr Lim and the leadership address it, rather than crack jokes about it, the better for the party.

Until then, neither Dr Lim nor any other Gerakan leader should take offence if people see the Gerakan as "another Chinese party."

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