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Absent delegates no damper to lively speeches at Gerakan meeting

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"ONE Heart, One Nation, One Vision", screamed a huge banner displaying Parti Gerakan's new slogan in the hall where the party's 27th annual delegates conference was held last weekend.

Outside the hall, two television sets aired non-stop the party's song.

Greeted by this atmosphere, many had gone to Dewan Wawasan at Menara PGRM, anticipating some fiery debate on issues related to corruption, nepotism and cronyism.

Nothing of that sort materialised though. "It just fizzled out," said an observer.

The reason for this, party president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik explained at a post-conference interview, was because Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech at the conference's opening had set the tone.

Dr Lim said: "Dr Mahathir, who is the Barisan Nasional chairman, made his stand very clear on these issues when he opened the conference."

However, Dr Lim wasted no time in taking charge of the direction of the proceedings.

In fact, delegates did not have to wait long to see the party number one get cracking.

Dr Lim expressed his disappointment with the poor attendance of delegates after the official opening on Saturday morning.

He then repeatedly told delegates that they must show discipline and be present to follow the proceedings.

Yet, his call seemed to have fallen on deaf ears.

Just before the conclusion of the conference, barely 200 of the 1,800 delegates were present to debate on the party's resolutions and to amend certain sections of the constitution.

At one point, the dwindling number of delegates in the hall even prompted Dr Lim to announce that he would ask the maintenance crew to lower the airconditioning and if forced to, to switch it off.

Despite the obvious absence of Pressmen in the hall, the Minister of Primary Industries warned delegates that they should not be complacent.

"The journalists are all in the Press room, watching and following closely, all the debates via the closed-circuit television."

All in all, the party president was afterwards quite pleased with some of the issues brought up by the majority of the newly-elected branch and divisional chairmen.

"Issues related to the economic problems, privatisation and education were tackled vociferously," he said at the interview.

As for issues during the debate, there was a complaint over time allotted to speakers, and more importantly, issues related to Indah Water Consortium and the proposed privatisation of solid waste management.

State Assemblyman and Youth chairman Datuk Chang Ko Youn stood out among those in attendance because of his recent stand and tiff with Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh over the matter.

However, lest Chang, who is also a Perak Exco member and Penang Chief Minister and party vice-president, Tan Sri Koh Tsu Khoo forget, they are both members of the National Local Government Council.

They had been briefed and had endorsed the privatisation of solid waste.

The two should have known better by referring any disagreement to the Central Committee or to Dr Lim, to bring the matter up in the Cabinet and

not to take the matter to the Minister concerned.

The delegates, selected to debate on the presidential address, took pains to discuss the issues on economy and education.

Some delegates raised the issues of SPM high-achievers who could not get places in local universities.

One delegate even suggested that Form Six be abolished and replaced with matriculation classes.

The argument put forth was that more and more students felt that such a move would also help the government to plan ahead the manpower requirements for the future.

With most of the major BN component parties having concluded their annual general assemblies or delegates conference meetings, the time has come for these parties to gear up for the general elections which is barely 1 1/2 years from now.

Wanita chief Datuk Kee Phaik Cheen must be credited for urging the party to set up a pre-election Task Force.

Her rationale is simple ... "will the pendulum swing again in favour of the Opposition?"

If there is cohesiveness and total commitment from all BN parties in "One Heart, One Nation, One Vision", there will be no problem in tackling the general election with confidence.

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