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Drama and infighting in a DAP searching for new direction

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THE scars from a highway accident four years ago are still clearly etched on Lim Kit Siang's broad forehead. They run above his eyebrows like criss-crossing wrinkles and there is a rather pronounced bump on the right side, as though he has just been knocked by a hard object.

But these are only the physical scars. The other type of scars - the emotional kind - probably outnumber the physical ones but, don't expect to hear Lim talk about them.

The Opposition Leader and DAP secretary-general, as most journalists would know, is not the sort to indulge in heart-to-heart conversation with just anybody, much less, someone from a paper he often lambasts as pro-government.

Despite a life spent in the very public arena of politics, Lim is, in person, rather reserved and soft-spoken - a stark contrast to his fire-and-brimstone public image.

He has formal manners and little patience for smalltalk. Yet, this is the same man who had, the afternoon we met, spoken for close to two hours in debating a Parliamentary bill.

Lim is in his element only when talking about politics. For instance, his former political secretary and lawyer Teng Chang Khim, who occasionally joins Lim for supper or a drink at the pub, insists his political boss is "a well-rounded person".

When asked what they talked about at such occasions, he says rather sheepishly: "Er ... mainly politics although, at one time, he could not stop talking about the Internet."

"He has politics on his mind every waking hour of the day," says a Penang DAP figure.

There is an undeniably purposeful, imperious even, air about Lim, 57 this year and 32 years in politics.

His admirers describe it as "charisma" but, his detractors say, it is part of his cold, supercilious and domineering personality.

Of late, the attacks on Lim have reached to pretty strong terms: undemocratic, dictatorial, authoritarian. He has even been compared to Indonesia's Suharto and, this, from people who were his most trusted comrades.

What began as an act of rebellion by three party leaders - Wee Choo Keong Liew Ah Khim and Fung Ket Wing - has spread to encompass discontented party figures in other States and, more seriously, resulted in a split in Penang DAP.

Lim admits he is facing one of the worst political crises in the party's history.

He says: "It's one of the worst ... so many States involved and so many people. Previously, it was just pockets. Now, it's quite widespread because they have been around so long, the unhappiness has built up ... they have stitched it all up, you could say."

What happened was that the rebelling trio of Wee, Liew and Fung had somehow managed to galvanise other DAP figures who, for reasons of their own, had been dissatisfied with the party or, more specifically, the secretary-general.

It was a coming together of old grievances - people who had had enough of Lim's forceful ways, those whom he had been sidelined or put to pasture and those resentful of the meteoric rise of his son, Guan Eng.

The resentment over Guan Eng's political acumen cannot be underestimated; at one stage, Liew, also an MP, asked the Dewan Rakyat Speaker to move his seat from beside Guan Eng to behind him.

Even those who have left the party like Chinese educationist Dr Kua Kia Soong, have jumped on the bandwagon.

The Penang revolt, involving two of the party's most brilliant strategists, was particularly disturbing. Relations between Lim and the Penang DAP leadership had been taut since the 1995 general election.

"I heard that after Tanjng 3, he stopped calling them for supper or drinks," says former Perak chairman Ting Chek Ming.

Things came to a head when Lim announced his willingness to lead Penang in the next general election. (Lim has since insisted that what he meant was that he was willing to lead the Save Guan Eng campaign in Penang).

The Penang reaction, although limited to a key group, stunned him.

"They are close comrades ... it went very deep," he says.

His relationship with many of these people go back to the 1970s. Liew's position is said to have hurt him most because both were really close whereas, Fung was the one with him in the car accident which gave him all those scars.

A Penang DAP figure explains it this way: "The 1995 general election was a political watershed. After that, there was nothing to hold us from speaking up. We felt the confrontational style of politics was out. We wanted an electable image and, we felt we could do better without Kit Siang."

The party's woes have since been played out in excruciating detail in almost every newspaper and the rebellious trio have even appeared on primetime TV news.

Many of those criticising him refer to his "political style".

Says Perak's Ting: "He's been like this (domineering) since the 70s ... especially at meetings, he likes to have his way. We are just rubber stamps."

And neither, it seems does Lim like people to go against his wishes, something that Ting learnt to his own detriment in 1974 when he decided to go for the Perak DAP chairman's post.

"Kit Siang never accepted me and made no bones about it," says Ting.

According to the same Penang DAP figure: "He uses the party machinery well. He also uses people and if you don't toe the line, you are finished. It's his style.

"These were things we didn't like about him in the past but, then, there was the larger agenda especially during the years when we believed we could capture Penang."

Ting adds: "Most of us just stomach his ways. Those who can't, leave. Most leave quietly, only Wee Choo Keong decided to do it with a bang."

But Peter Paul Dason, a long-time Penang DAP figure who remains loyal to Lim, retorts: "Domineering? I think he's too soft ... tolerates too much nonsense from too many people. He tolerates these people long after others are sick of them.

"Of course, Kit Siang can take criticism," says Theresa Kok, a young, up-and-coming female figure in the party.

Kok recalls how Lim asked her to reproduce a paper she had written and, which was quite critical of him, for circulation among members.

"The irony is that these people were once beneficiaries of Kit Siang's way of managing the party. They didn't complain when things went well for them," says Teng Chang Khim who is also the political bureau director.

The other irony, according to Teng, is that the current crisis was partly a result of the party's attempt at reform after the 1995 general election.

The party had thrown itself into a series of brainstorming sessions and discussions after 1995. Apart from a poor campaign strategy in Penang, there was agreement that DAP had failed to capture the imagination of the young generation and the sizeable female votes.

Over the years, the role model of younger voters had become politicians like Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad rather than the plain and sober men who were the mainstay of the DAP.

Lim himself admits: "In the 1960s and 1970s, it was so easy for the young to identify with DAP. Now, it's a different era ... human rights, environment, IT ... these are issues today."

Hence there was talk of the New DAP just as the British Labour Party had reinvented itself as the New Labour. These brainstorming sessions found enthusiasm among the younger group who presented papers giving suggestions and ideas for reform.

Not all of this went down well with the old guards who found it hard to see a place for themselves in a New DAP. And this coming so soon after Lim's ebullient embrace of IT which many older members found simply too daunting to even want to understand.

"They said that he had gone mad about the Internet," says a party member.

The younger group, on the other, caught Lim's Internet fever and bought their own computers.

The reform movement took on tones of a serious generation gap or, as one party member puts, "reformists versus conservatives".

Lim was squeezed in the middle.

He needed the younger set to provide the impetus for change. At the same time, he also needed the older group for their experience and stability.

While the older ones felt threatened, the younger set thought he was too conservative and unwilling to let go of the past.

Lim tried to strike a consensus, to assure the older ones that they still had a role. For instance, he appointed Liew organising chairman of the party's 30th anniversary last year but, by December, when Liew still had not done anything, a Melaka member had to take over.

"That was the most agonising part. One young chap even broke off from us because he thought I was siding the older ones. After several months, I finally decided I was going to move ahead," he recalls.

Then, the rumour-mongering began: Kit Siang has sold out to the BN, look at how he supports the government's IT. He has gone soft. He has forgotten his old comrades.

The party drama is expected to play on till the party congress in August. The rebels probably hope to force some sort of debate at the congress, aimed at cutting him down to size.

Those with Lim says the rebel's strategy is to reduce the number of votes Lim will secure at the party congress. If the votes are significantly reduced, that means he has lost support and must go.

But a number of those in the rebelling camp says: "Most of us still want him as our leader. It's just that after so many years, it's time to change our style and set the foundation for greater democracy."

Lim, on his part, says with a grim smile: "The congress will decide everything."

Until then, the drama will play on.

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