

17/03/1998

Two friendly rivals in Penang out to consolidate support for BN

A. Kathirasen

WHILE the rest of the country is keenly watching the Umno divisional elections and the statements by the party's leaders, Penang residents are closely following the activities of the Gerakan and the MCA.

Since last week, both parties have been very active in the State and the most conspicuous evidence of this is the flying of party flags and buntings in most parts of the State and certainly along every street in Georgetown centre.

The flags and buntings of the Gerakan and the MCA are competing for space, often back-to-back on lamp posts and other structures. And their leaders have been vocal in issuing statements and being in the limelight.

Initially, some residents saw this as a sign that the general elections might be held in the next few months. But this theory was buried, following Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's unequivocal statement on Saturday, that there would be no election within the next six months.

So why the sudden intense activity in Penang? Everyone knows that the Gerakan and the MCA want to be in control of the State Government. Could this then be an early sounding of the bugles?

In the 1969 general elections, the Gerakan ousted the MCA-led Alliance Government in Penang. The Gerakan was then in the Opposition and the Chief Minister was from the MCA. In 1974, the Gerakan joined the Barisan Nasional and until today, the Chief Minister of the State is from the party.

It is an open secret that the MCA would like the Chief Minister to come from its ranks.

Penang is particularly being wooed by both parties because it is the only State in the peninsula which can have a Chinese as Chief Minister, as the community forms the majority here.

The Gerakan launched its 30th anniversary logo at the Dewan Sri Pinang on March 1 with its top leaders, including president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, congregating in Penang.

On March 7 and 8, the MCA's top guns descended on Penang with a bang - cymbals clashing, drums throbbing, lions roaring - to celebrate the party's 49th anniversary.

A dinner was held at the Esplanade where, the MCA claims, some 10,000 people attended on March 7. The next morning, party supremo Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik addressed a large gathering of supporters at the Penang International Sports Arena, and later the MCA leaders toured the various districts.

The MCA lost all the seats it contested in Penang in the 1990 general election. But in the 1995 general election, it bounced back with a vengeance to win all nine State seats and two of the three Parliamentary seats it contested.

The Gerakan won 10 of the 11 State and two of the four Parliamentary seats it contested in an election which saw the routing of the DAP which only managed to get one State seat and three Parliamentary seats in Penang.

The next MCA Central Committee meeting is scheduled to be held in Penang on March 28.

Two friendly rivals eyeing the State Government, having two major functions within a week of each other, could be a signal that the battle

lines are being drawn for the next general elections.

Is the MCA flexing its muscles?

State MCA chairman and deputy secretary-general Datuk Dr Sak Cheng Lum said the celebration was not meant to send a signal or to frighten anyone.

"It was to continue to consolidate and unite our members," he said.

"Our main worry is that the next general elections will be tough. Nobody can fault us for wanting to win back all our seats. We know it won't be easy to retain our seats, and to win we must continue to get the confidence of voters.

"The most important thing is to continue to garner support for our candidates. Our seats are there. We expect to contest nine State and three Parliamentary seats in Penang, and we want to make sure we clinch all of them for the Barisan Nasional."

Dr Sak says it was party policy to rotate the venue for celebrations and central committee meetings among the various States and the Federal Capital, and that in 1992, the anniversary celebrations were also held in Penang.

The MCA anniversary is on Feb 27. Dr Sak says the decision to hold the celebration in Penang was taken early last year.

He said: "We received tremendous support from the people the last time and we have an obligation to them. That is why we are pushing our elected representatives to work hard.

"This gathering has most certainly given a boost to the party members in Penang who will strive even harder to serve the people. Under Dr Ling, we are action oriented as our programmes have shown."

Gerakan national publicity committee chairman Datuk Dr Kang Chin Seng, does not see the MCA bash as a threat to the party.

He said: "I think the voters see us as the BN and not as individual parties during the general elections. A win for the Gerakan means the MCA will also do well, and this is good for the BN.

"If the Gerakan and MCA are active, the people will view it as the BN being active. I see this as a reinforcement of efforts and results. I, for one, am not worried about the MCA being too active. The more active the better, for the Gerakan is extremely active.

"In fact, our 30th anniversary celebration is for the whole year. We have a whole lot of programmes lined up - all geared towards the common man."

Gerakan Central Committee and Central Working Committee member Dr Toh Kin Woon, one of the party's strategists, said there was nothing wrong with political parties flexing their muscles and having high aims of capturing power.

"In politics, you aim for the top post and to control power. Gerakan also wants to remain in power.

"We cannot expect others not to want to take power. What matters is that we have to work harder and serve the people well. In fact, an active MCA will push us harder and the ultimate beneficiaries will be the people."

Although the party was formed on March 24, 1968, the Gerakan celebrates the day it was registered - May 25, 1968 - as its anniversary.

Dr Toh added: "The special logo is a rallying point. We want to remind party members of the founding principles and the significance of our logo - One Heart, One Nation, One Vision. It is also to reflect our future direction."

He says all political parties have been preparing for the next general elections since 1995.

So it is appropriate that three years into the current term, all parties step up their activities.

"We look at it this way - we are a part of the BN and if we win all our

seats and the MCA wins all its seats, the BN remains strong."

Dr Sak adds: "We are not competing against each other. In the general elections, we are competing against the DAP for votes. The fight, therefore, is with the DAP."

(END)