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Focus is on Gerakan secretary-general, central committee posts

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THE 1,743 delegates to the national Gerakan assembly today will not be concerned about the fight for the deputy president's post. That is a foregone conclusion.

Their attention will be focussed on who the party president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik will pick as secretary-general, and the scramble for the 18 central committee posts.

The Gerakan assembly, following the compromises made at the vice-presidential level and the lack of a challenger for the top post, will not see much excitement this year. And that is the reason the attention will be on the posts of secretary-general and central committee members.

Incumbent secretary-general Tan Sri Chan Choong Tak is not interested in the post. In fact, only recently he tendered his resignation to Keng Yaik but after a pow-wow, it was decided that he stay on until the party election.

In the past, the secretary-general and treasurer-general were elected but following a recent amendment to the party constitution, effective this year, the two posts become appointed positions.

Keng Yaik has to appoint one of the 18 elected central committee members to these two posts.

Although the field is open, one of the names mentioned for the secretary-general's post is Datuk Dr Kang Chin Seng of Penang. Kang has decided not to defend his vice-presidential seat.

Nibong Tebal Member of Parliament Dr Goh Cheng Teik, veteran Datuk Alex Lee and Kang are the incumbents. Lee declined to defend his post. Since the party leadership wanted to accommodate Goh, Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, and a non-Chinese in the VP line-up, Kang did not contest that seat.

When nominations closed, Goh, Koh and Negeri Sembilan Gerakan secretary Dr S. Vijayarajam were returned unopposed.

Kang is one of 28 people who filed nomination papers to contest the 18 central committee posts. So the talk is, Kang might be appointed the new secretary-general to make up for his willingness to respect the president's desire for a no-contest situation.

The only problem is that he is from Penang and Keng Yaik may prefer someone from Kuala Lumpur for this post. And Koh, who has always been somewhat uneasy about Kang's loyalty to him, might not want the powerful post of party secretary-general to go to Kang.

If Kang does not get the secretary-general's post he may be appointed treasurer-general or a vice-president by Keng Yaik.

Another name that has been mentioned is incumbent deputy secretary-general Tan Kee Kwong, son of one of Malaysia's most respected politicians, the late Tan Sri Dr Tan Chee Koon. The other deputy secretary-general, Chia Kwang Chye, whose performance in Parliament has been excellent, is also a possibility for promotion although he is somewhat junior. He is a close confidante of Koh.

Deputy treasurer-general Chua Chong An of Federal Territory may be promoted but this is not a certainty.

Keng Yaik has expressed a desire to see all State Gerakan chairmen in the central committee. With Kerk (Perak chairman) expected to retain the deputy presidency, Koh (Penang) in as vice-president, and Keng Yaik holding the Johor chairman's post, it leaves eight State chairmen in the

contest.

Insiders expect all eight to be voted in. The contest will therefore be tough for the remaining 10 posts. Two of the contestants for the central committee post - former youth secretary-general Lum Weng Keong and Penang's Datuk Rhina Bhar - have since withdrawn, leaving 26 people to fight it out.

Kang, Chia, Tan, Penang Gerakan secretary Dr Teng Hock Nan, Penang State Executive Councillor Dr Toh Kin Woon, Perak Gerakan secretary Khoo Su Chai, and losing Teluk Intan parliamentary by-election candidate Chee See Choke are expected to win.

Other front runners are former youth leader Datuk Chan Ko Yooun and former Johor chairmen Khoo Chee Huat and Teo Kok Chee. Keng Yaik's younger brother Keng Guan is also contesting a central committee seat.

The fact that there are no contests for the party presidency and vice-presidency, together with the youth and wanita top posts, shows the maturity of members as the general election is looming.

The fight between Kerk and Lukut branch chairman Tan Kang Leng is not expected to be more than a side-show although some leaders fear that those frustrated with the leadership might just vote for Tan to vent their anger.

Kang Leng has admitted that he will lose but maintains that he is fighting to bring the attention of the party to the problem of phantom members in Negeri Sembilan and to signal the need for party reform.

He claims that there are at least nine branches with phantom members in Negeri Sembilan. His decision to take on Kerk apparently stems from the fact that Kerk was sent to investigate the claim and his findings showed otherwise. Kang Leng feels Kerk was biased in his probe.

In the meantime, several State Gerakan committees have come out openly to pledge support for Kerk. Keng Yaik himself has urged Kang Leng not to go ahead with the challenge.

It is interesting to note that the general assembly is scheduled to discuss issues such as the Internal Security Act, the Universities and University Colleges Act and other matters that Opposition parties have been harping on.

It is likely that the delegates will call for a review of both Acts to ensure greater freedom of speech and association.

In fact, delegates are said to favour a more open society within campuses so that there would be greater discussion and access to students. This, a Youth leader said, would help diffuse the over-dependence of students on news and views on the Internet.

Gerakan delegates, who are not always known to fully toe the Government line although they are in the Government, may just come up with some interesting suggestions this Saturday and Sunday. However, much depends on the presidential speech and the opening address of Barisan Nasional chairman and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

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