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Prospects still good for Penang BN despite challenging factors

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GERAKAN president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik is nothing if not practical. Like Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, his counterpart in the MIC, he is known to say his piece even if it does not go down too well with others.

Sometimes, of course, they get into trouble with their comments. Keng Yaik's practical outlook was demonstrated again last week when he said he expected the Barisan Nasional to lose a few seats in Penang in the general election.

It is not something leaders would want to say. In any election, leaders will always express confidence publicly. Deep down they may feel they are doomed but they invariably give a "we will win" message to the world.

It is also politically prudent to evince confidence to motivate members to work harder.

Keng Yaik, however, said the BN would lose some seats. But he quickly qualified that the BN would still form the Penang State Government.

He said: "We will do better than in the 1990 general election but will not have as many seats as we did after the 1995 election. I think, it will be more nearer to the 1990 result."

He added that everyone would have to work hard to ensure the BN wins. He had no doubt, however, that the BN would retain power.

Political observers agree with Keng Yaik's assessment of the situation.

In Penang, the DAP has been the most significant opposition party. Although in elections prior to 1982, Pas used to win a few seats, it has been almost impotent since then.

In the 1990 general election, the DAP won 14 of 33 seats, denying the BN a two-thirds majority. It was a tremendous boost to the DAP and its best ever performance in the State.

In 1995, buoyed by the 1990 victory, the DAP went for the kill and was confident of taking over the State Government. But it suffered its worst ever defeat in Penang, winning only one State seat.

It was a humiliating defeat for the DAP but an astounding victory for the BN which had not anticipated so great a swing in the pendulum.

Immediately after the polls in 1995, there was a feeling amongst Penang residents that they might have made a mistake by giving the BN too much control.

This feeling was given form in the Bagan parliamentary by-election when Lim Hock Seng of the DAP won with a thumping majority.

On the ground in Penang, there is still this feeling that they must make amends.

Which, one top State BN leader confided, is causing worry for the coalition. "Even Koh (Chief Minister and State BN head Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon) is worried that if too many people decide to create a balance, they will end up giving too many seats to the DAP and it might take over the Government."

It was, no doubt, in the face of such feedback that Keng Yaik made his statement.

Penang is the only peninsula State where the Malays are in the minority but they have good representation at State level. Over the past few general elections, Umno has delivered all 12 State seats contested.

Some Penang politicians believe that Keadilan will eat into some of Umno's support as Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is from Penang and was former State Umno chief. He still wields influence and has many friends and

supporters in his constituency of Permatang Pauh and elsewhere.

Keng Yaik, in stating his reason for saying the BN would lose some seats, did mention the "slight" division among Malay voters as one reason. The other, he said, was the economic turmoil which had left its mark although things were improving.

Perceptions about the manner in which Anwar was taken to trial, his infamous black-eye and now claims of arsenic poisoning will also likely figure in the decision of voters.

No one can ignore the Anwar factor in Penang but it should also not be overrated as not everybody in Penang was enthusiastic about Anwar when he was Deputy Prime Minister. He had critics within the BN, including Umno.

However, since Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took over as Penang Umno head, he has managed to consolidate the party and won back some support.

Penang residents see him as a moderate man who has the interest of all citizens regardless of race at heart and, therefore, suitable to head a multi-racial nation.

Abdullah was leading the State Umno until he was replaced by Anwar. This followed the 1987 Umno presidential election where Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was challenged by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. Abdullah was said to have been aligned with Razaleigh.

With the division within Umno and some Malay support wavering, Pas is confident it will be able to return to active politics in the State. One of its most vocal leaders, Mohamad Sabu, MP for Kubang Kerian, Kelantan, has indicated he might not be averse to contest in his home State - Penang - in the coming election.

The DAP is confident of doing better this time.

A State leader said: "The last time was a disaster but this time we can do better. The writing is on the wall. We can certainly win back some of the seats we lost in 1995."

However, the leader did not want to discuss the possibility of forming the State Government. The DAP strategy now is to say that it only wants to reduce the BN's majority and ensure check-and-balance.

It fears that voicing a desire to form the next State Government would result in a repeat of 1995.

And, as things stand today, Keng Yaik is likely to be proven right.

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