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## Charting a course for the party in the new millennium

ALL eyes will be trained on Penang today where Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will officiate Gerakan's Millennium National Delegates Conference or NDC 2000.

As the first national delegates' conference since the 1999 general election, the significance of hosting the event on the Isle of the Betel Nut - Gerakan's birthplace 32 years ago - is not lost on the event's participants nor astute political observers.

For Penang is where Gerakan has held sway for three decades. The party proved its mettle again last November in a battle which it pitted relatively young politicians against seasoned Opposition veterans for key parliamentary seats.

The victory scored by its "giant killers" - Chia Kwang Chye and Lee Kah Choon - in defeating DAP supremos Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh in Bukit Bendera and Jelutong respectively, was one which has gone into the annals of the Barisan Nasional's history.

It is also a definite cause for reminder and celebration at today's NDC.

And who can blame the Gerakan for indulging in some back-thumping and shoulder-patting today, considering that the party's performance of winning seven parliamentary and 22 State seats almost equals the 1995 general election performance where they secured seven parliamentary and 23 State seats.

The victory was made sweeter when they also overcame three main obstacles: turmoil within the Gerakan, turmoil within certain BN component parties and concentration of Opposition forces on certain Gerakan seats.

Even sweeter is the quality of victory - getting the scalps of the top Opposition leadership.

"The fact that the Opposition chose the Gerakan as its main opponent - especially in Bukit Bendera - was definitely significant in determining the future course of both parties," a senior Gerakan member pointed out.

Noteworthy was also how both the Gerakan and the DAP fielded their respective secretaries-general in this hot seat and that allowed plenty of room for uncertainty, excitement and sleepless nights.

"The lesson we gleaned from the 1999 general election experience," says Chia "was not to adopt a fighting approach but to take a positive stance simply by working hard and gauging our service."

And it is this very experience which the Gerakan wishes to use as a benchmark in calibrating its performance against other political parties.

Not often perceived as a party to gloat or bask in its glories for too long, the Gerakan can also be expected this weekend to embark on some soul-searching.

The party's future in the BN, particularly in fiercely guarding its power base and its "crown jewel" of Penang, will be featured as well.

Party president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik recently described the Gerakan as a party which had "discipline, honour and love for each other."

"We are also fighters and I will fight anyone who dares disturb the party," he said in reference to repeated efforts by some quarters in wresting the Penang leadership from Gerakan.

The Gerakan, Dr Lim added, needed to protect what its members had achieved since its formation three decades ago in Penang - a State which is the "heart and soul" of the party.

"We, therefore, have to depend on our members here to keep the heart

beating ... if not, the heart will die."

And this why the party will impress on its members during the NDC the need to be vigilant against threats and identify political strategies to maintain Gerakan's supremacy in Penang.

Apart from distinguishing the party's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, the issue of succession also demands attention.

At a time when its BN partners like Umno, MCA and MIC are embroiled in a leadership tussle, the Gerakan can be viewed as a party whose stand on succession is "crystal clear."

Its on-going efforts at preparing young leaders with potential to assume top party positions is perhaps one which should be emulated.

Leadership within the Gerakan, a party insider says, has never been an issue with members.

"We have always practised what we preach with older members," the insider stated, "when making way for younger ones."

Efforts taken by the party in providing a platform to younger leaders for eventual takeover - often via Gerakan's Youth wing - is not lost on Gerakan-watchers.

The next level of leadership in the party is quite obvious today if one were to observe the subtle preparations being carried out.

The party president had always imbued the to cultivate a pool of young people to share the party's core belief - non-racial politics is the answer to peace, progress and stability for all Malaysians.

Mindful that the road ahead is not smooth in a society fast undergoing socio-political changes, the Gerakan, it appears, is not daunted in realising its goal - to create a just and equitable Malaysian society.

And Gerakan's first NDC of the new millennium is perhaps the most appropriate arena for the party to reinforce this hope by driving home an important point.

"And the point," Chia says, "is that we must stay true to our roots if we want to remain relevant in Malaysian politics."

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