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Grand old man of the DAP

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AFTER a lifetime in politics, the 'grand old man' of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) is calling it a day.

'I am hanging my boots,' says Dr Chen Man Hin. 'The political situation has changed, the aspirations are different. Those days people only wanted jobs ... now they want good jobs. I am leaving it to the younger chaps to take over.'

Chen has had a good innings in politics, and the decades of political battles have taught him the art of leaving gracefully. The septuagenarian and grandfather of six has announced that he will no longer contest in elections.

Undoubtedly, Chen's views as party adviser will still be much sought-after. As DAP deputy national chairman Karpal Singh says: 'He is from the old and seasoned school of politics. As a founder-member of the DAP, his views are respected.'

While Chen's role in the party may have diminished in the last 10 years, his comments still hog the limelight. When the DAP pulled out from the Opposition Front comprising PAS, Parti Keadilan Nasional and Parti Rakyat Malaysia recently, Chen was the first senior DAP leader to publicly acknowledge that the party's venture had brought it more pain than gain.

PAS' stance on an Islamic state, Chen had elucidated, was not compatible with the DAP's objective of keeping Malaysia secular.

'He saw no light at the end of the tunnel and was willing to admit it, when others were hesitant,' a leader from the Youth wing says.

The 1999 general election was the DAP's worst. Heavyweights Lim Kit Siang, then party secretary-general, and Karpal were voted out of parliament for the first time since 1969. Karpal lost both state and parliamentary seats. Penang, the hot-bed of DAP activities, lost its heat when the party won only one of 33 state seats up for grabs.

'It was a good lesson. They (those who criticised the opposition-pact move) were right,' says Chen.

The DAP stalwart has always been known as a man who keeps his cool through the most troubled of times. This was most evident during the Government's Operasi Lalang in 1987, when Lim and Karpal were detained under the Internal Security Act. The incident plunged the DAP headquarters in Kuala Lumpur into chaos.

Activities had to go on; decisions had to be made. Amidst the confusion, Chen was a calming figure as, spectacles perched on his nose, he engaged in deep discussion with his colleagues over their next move.

When Chen, who was then DAP chairman, emerged from the meeting, he was careful to weigh his words so as not to give away any signs of defiance or sense of hopelessness that the party might harbour. He calmly told party members not to do anything drastic and to be patient until the situation eased off.

Chen, together with DAP deputy secretary-general Lee Lam Thye, held the DAP fort until the leaders were released a few years later. 'Dr Chen was a stabilising force with his responsible and sober thoughts,' says Karpal. 'He worked hard to keep the party intact until we came out.'

Operasi Lalang was stressful for the party. It took its toll on some party leaders like Lam Thye, who left the DAP and quit active politics some years later.

Chen, born on Nov 15, 1924 in China's Guongdong Province, came to Malaya

as a toddler. His father, who had a rubber smallholding in Hulu Langat, had the foresight to send Chen to Seremban for his secondary school education, though this was interrupted by the Japanese Occupation. The tough years under the Japanese taught Chen the art of survival when he supplemented the family income by working as a newspaper vendor and lorry driver.

After the war, Chen enrolled at the University of Malaya's King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore in 1946. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad came in a year later.

Chen graduated in 1952 and returned to serve at the Seremban General Hospital before setting up Chen Dispensary, which soon became a household name in town. The clinic on Jalan Raja Munawir is still standing, albeit with some renovations.

There are many who say they get free treatment at Chen Dispensary. Chen just smiles when asked on the matter.

'It's not free ... it depends. But I know that most of the sick people are from the poor section of society where there is no proper sanitation or water supply. I came to know better the social problems of the poor people,' he says.

Chen's ideals to help the poor and raise funds for charity were inspired by his teachers. They continued in his university days when he became active in the students union. When the British detained leaders such as James Puthuchearry in Singapore, Chen was among those who organised missions to visit the detainees.

In 1965, Chen received his baptism of fire in politics. Standing as an independent - as the fledgling DAP had not been registered yet - he won the Rahang state seat by beating the Alliance candidate by 3,145 votes. It was a victory Chen will never forget.

Lighting up as he recalls the nostalgic events of 1965, Chen says the DAP then was very much under the influence of the Singapore-based People Action Party (PAP).

Chen was then secretary of the Negri Sembilan DAP headed by Dr R. Sivaret-nam, brother of R. Rajaratnam who went on to become Singapore's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Rajaratnam was then a strong influence in Chen's life.

'Life as an opposition member in the early days was tough ... straight away you were suspected to be a communist sympathiser. But I was full of energy, enthusiasm and highly motivated. It overrode my fears,' he says, giving away a rare sheepish smile.

'After the results were announced, the supporters carried me on their shoulders for a good half kilometre, from the counting hall to the DAP office. It is something I will never forget.'

The 1965 general election was the start of Chen's long liaison with the constituents of Rahang and Seremban. Four years later he not only retained Rahang but also won the Seremban parliamentary seat. Chen continued to rule the rostrum in the two constituencies for the next 12 years.

The 1982 general election was a watershed for Chen and the DAP. After years of mud-slinging between the party and the ruling coalition's MCA as to who actually held the support of the Chinese community, the issue was finally put to the test: the DAP had repeatedly dared the MCA to field its best leaders in Chinese-majority seats. MCA president Datuk Lee San Choon responded by opting to contest the Seremban seat.

The Dr Chen-San Choon battle is etched in the history books of Malaysian politics. Chen, as incumbent since 1969, started off as favourite. But midway through campaigning, he stumbled across some totally unexpected problems - the presence of 'new voters'.

'I thought I was on top ... until the house-to-house campaign. Only then

did I realise there were new "constituents".'

Chen says if he had won against the MCA president then, it would have radically changed things for the DAP.

But Chen lost. It marked his first defeat in a general election since 1965, and his slide in politics.

San Choon quit the political scene a year later and Chen regained Seremban in a by-election. But he lost his grip in subsequent general elections for both parliamentary and state seats. In 1986, he lost the Peradong state seat to the then political-unknown Datuk Wong See Wah but retained Seremban, beating Yim Chee Chong of the Barisan Nasional by 1,064 votes.

Wong and Yim turned out to be Chen's nemesis in subsequent polls. In 1990, Yim edged Chen in Seremban by 77 votes. In 1995, Wong thrashed Chen in the Rasah parliamentary seat. In 1999, Chen only stood in the state constituency of Temiang, which he also lost.

Although Chen attributes part of his defeats to the constituency re-delineation exercises, some feel the political landscape has changed.

'Those days,' says an MCA assemblyman, 'doctors were favoured as candidates because they were able to serve the people by providing medical services and advice. But these days, it requires lots of funding and work to take care of constituents.'

The assemblyman says people are now more sensitive to basic needs such as proper housing, roads and other amenities. 'For instance, they dislike flooding, something Rahang was prone to.'

Chen still jogs three kilometres a day in the vicinity of the Seremban Lake Gardens. In his hectic earlier years, he never lost touch with his children - three sons and two daughters. Together with his Kirby College-trained teacher wife, the couple guided the children to successful careers.

His eldest son is a neurologist and the second an orthopaedist, both in Singapore. His daughter is a civil rights lawyer in Toronto while another son is practising immigration law in London. The youngest girl is a software engineer in Australia.

That all his children are not in Malaysia does not bother Chen. 'It is a borderless world. With the Internet, nothing is far. Sometimes I get calls from my children and the line is so clear I tend to think they are talking from somewhere near the airport,' he says.

It has been more than 10 years since Chen left the hallowed halls of Parliament. 'I miss the heated debates,' he says. One of the most highly charged moments Chen experienced in Parliament was in 1971 when he debated amendments to the Federal Constitution pertaining to special rights and rules and the national language.

Chen has survived 36 years in politics, all of them in the opposition. But it has in no way dented his love for the country. His recollection of Malaysia is that of a beautiful country with great potential to become a developed nation - that is, if it continues to portray the image of a democratic and secular country.

'It is important to send a message to the world that we want to be friends with all and to participate in the era of globalisation and the knowledge society,' he says.

As a longstanding politician, there is no doubt that Chen has left an indelible mark on the local political scene.

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