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Longest serving president's steady hand at Gerakan's helm

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COME 2005, Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik will mark his 25th year as leader of one of the most senior parties in Barisan Nasional.

This "endorsement" for Dr Lim - already the multi-racial party's longest-serving president - is expected to be made next Saturday during the party's triennial elections.

"This is the last party election before the general election. There might be some movements in this regard. That's what makes elections exciting," Dr Lim said.

During the party's last central committee meeting for the 1999-2002 term on Sept 21, Dr Lim, who is also Primary Industries Minister, appealed to about 1,800 delegates to retain the party's top five leaders.

Besides himself, the others are deputy president Datuk Seri Kerk Choo Ting and vice-presidents Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, Datuk Dr Tan Kee Kwong and Datuk Dr S. Vijayarajam.

Dr Lim also asked delegates to retain secretary-general Chia Kwang Chye and treasurer-general Datuk Ng Chiang Chin as central committee members. Both posts are appointed by the president.

However, elections are not the only highlight for next week's national delegates' conference.

Over the years, Dr Lim said, the party had weathered all kinds of challenges and this has greatly strengthened the bond between the members and the party leadership.

"We have always adopted a non-racial approach towards everything and, of late, have been constantly advising our members on how to face the Opposition which is strongly mixing religion with politics to try and influence the people."

He said Gerakan believes racial unity would be the weapon to counter these Opposition tactics and would stress this to its members at its national delegates' conference next month.

"I will suggest that Gerakan take a deeper look into the spirit of Bangsa Malaysia and how to further bind the races and work towards Vision 2020."

Dr Lim said Gerakan would even propose that a National Unity Day be declared a public holiday. The ideal date should be Sept 16, the day Malaysia was formed in 1963.

"This is necessary to create a greater understanding of our various religions and cultures," he said, adding that it would also encourage better interaction among the races.

During the conference, he said, Gerakan would also pledge its support for the Vision School concept, while urging the Government to also look into implementing the Student Integration Unity Programme.

Dr Lim said this programme was introduced in the early 1980s, but was never implemented.

"We are prepared to face the Chinese community, including the Dong Jiao Zhong with regard to the Vision School concept. We will go to the ground and explain to the people.

"For Gerakan, what is more important is the implementation of Vision Schools. There must be clear guidelines."

Dr Lim said former president Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu had, during his tenure, proposed similar concepts and there was no reason for Gerakan to oppose the move.

He said another good way to encourage racial integration is to have more joint ventures among the races.

"With the doors of globalisation fast opening, such ventures would be ideal in coming up with new ideas and ways of meeting future challenges," he said, adding that the party would also propose the setting up of a rehabilitation fund to assist small and medium-sized industries.

He said the future of businesses in the country was fast gearing towards k-economy and the Government should look into more dynamic programmes to prepare the people for this.

In Malaysia, he said, only 25 per cent of those aged between 17-24 were in universities and higher learning institutions compared to about 60 per cent in developed nations.

"Gerakan on its part hopes by next year to apply to the Government to set up an open virtual university, incorporating distance learning methods," he said, adding that they would call it "Universiti Wawasan".

He said the aim of this university would be to help working class people (mature students) attain higher education.

"The party also feels the work of the Education Ministry is getting too great and there is a need for it to be broken into two separate ministries - one for higher education and knowledge-economy; and the other for schools, vocational and technical training."

This would ensure quality control and a high standard of education in the country.

Amid a host of issues, including the line-up of its leaders, one issue remains "taboo" - Dr Lim's desire to retire.

The 63-year-old veteran politician had on several occasions voiced his desire to step down.

However, these were always met with objections from party members who strongly feel that Dr Lim has still a lot more to offer the party and the Barisan Nasional and should stay on for many more years.

"When I recently thought of calling it quits, members told me this was not the right time, considering Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was going to retire.

"They said my experience was vital during this transition period when Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi takes over," Dr Lim said, adding that his retirement could be discussed after the coming general election.