

# Can the rocket take off again?

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**DAP leaders spoke of reform and bringing in new blood after disastrous outings in the last two general elections but the party is still stuck in an uninspiring loop, writes JOCELINE TAN**

**F**ORMER DAP Member of Parliament Lim Guan Eng may be out of mainstream politics but he apparently keeps a rather high profile in Malacca, his home base since his conviction for sedition four years ago.

Although he is now just an ordinary DAP member, he is known to hold up to three or four press conferences a week. His press conferences are what some local reporters have termed "one-plus-three PCs", that is, he would call the media regarding one issue and ramble on to three other side issues.

Many reporters find so many press conferences in a week from a single politician rather excessive but they are thankful for the little mercies for Guan Eng does not read out his statements in that stiff Soviet-style of his more famous father, DAP national chairman Lim Kit Siang.

The younger Lim is far more informal and conversational but no less demanding.

"He can be very bossy. He can actually call and scold you if he does not like your report," said one reporter.

Guan Eng has added about 10kg to the lean frame he had the day he walked out of Kajang Prison in 1999

to a hero's welcome, but his trademark slicked-back-from-the-forehead hairdo, ala his father, remains unchanged.

Reporters covering him say there is no doubt that he is "gearing-up" for a comeback. He has been moving

around, attending political dinners especially in the southern states and maintaining his ties.

But his rather coy response was: "I will cross the bridge when I come to it."

Guan Eng's prohibition from hold-

ing political posts ends on Aug 25, 2004, almost exactly a year away. He will probably miss the next general election but some in the party think that when the ban ends, he will step back into DAP politics as though he has never been away.

Guan Eng, in other words, may be the possible answer to DAP's problems after dismal showings in the last two general elections.

The party has been making the news for all the wrong reasons in the last few months — a power struggle in Selangor and some pretty intense disagreements with Parti Keadilan Nasional over a couple of seats in the same state. At the same time, it is not sparing any punches for PAS on the Islamic state agenda.

Party leaders admit openly that they are going through challenging times.

"It's been a difficult time for us. We have not lost direction but we haven't been able to convince people about what we are doing," said party advisor Dr Chen Man Hin.

DAP Wanita chief Chong Eng said: "From 1990 to now, it has not been easy at all. These last few years have been the hardest."

They blame an unfriendly media, limited financial resources, the clamp on political ceramah and the ban on the public sale of the party newsletter, *The Rocket*.

"It has been like a political desert," Chong added.

# DAP eclipsed by fellow opposition parties

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But a large part of the troubles that the DAP is going through now is also due to its own doing.

Joining the opposition coalition in the 1999 polls turned out to be a costly mistake because its cooperation with PAS alienated its traditional Chinese support. On the other hand, quitting the coalition has left it somewhat of a pariah in the opposition camp.

DAP now faces the prospect of going into the next general election on its own, and by disassociating with PAS, its leaders hope it will

regain its old Chinese ground.

But according to social activist Tang Ah Chai of the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, the younger and more idealistic Chinese seem to be more drawn to Keadilan than DAP. This younger cohort comprises largely tertiary level students and those just entering the employment market. They are not extensive but are potentially influential.

"They are the post-NEP generation. Keadilan seems more multi-racial to them because it has a real mix of Malays, Chinese and Indians. Also, Keadilan has younger leaders whom they

can relate to," said Tang.

The DAP is quite aware of this and is said to have held discussions on the issue.

"After the 1999 elections, DAP leaders said they wanted to reform and to recruit new blood. But we don't see any sign of that. It's obvious they are in crisis," said Tang.

DAP leaders have been quick to blame external factors for their decline but are less eager to admit that they themselves have been sluggish about change and are frustrated by internal tensions.

The party has its share of infighting. For instance, there are two rival factions in Malacca: one headed by the state party chief Sim Tong Hin and the other by Guan Eng. Their political animosity is an open party secret although they try to be civil when they are together.

In Selangor, intense rivalry for control of the state only came to a conclusion recently. Earlier this year, Teng Chang Khim, a popular and savvy assemblyman, was ousted as the Youth chief.

"There is no sign of recovery in the party and my friends are always asking me when DAP is going to close shop," said S. Neelamekan, a DAP life member who is critical of the party but fiercely loyal to Kit Siang.

It is a sad juncture in history for a party that had almost single-handedly played watchdog to the government from the 60s through the 70s and into the 80s.

"The younger generation are not attracted because they do not know the sacrifices our leaders made," said Neelamekan.

DAP's decline began in the 90s after the Barisan Nasional's liberalisation policies on the economy and tertiary education, which took the pressure off two of the most explosive issues among the Chinese and cut the ground off from under the DAP.

And that was when the party came out with the dramatic tagline: Reform or die.

The party is far from dying, but at the same time if there has been reform, it has not been very visible.

Some say that change and rejuvenation can only take place when veteran leaders move on, otherwise the party will just age with the top leadership.

But there are few signs of that happening in the party.

Senior faces like Kit Siang, Karpal Singh and Kepong MP Dr Tan Seng Giaw are likely to contest the next election.

"Why not? They can still contribute. The criterion is not age but capability," said secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock.

The irony here is that DAP leaders who had

called on Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to make way for younger leaders are now themselves planning to stay on even after the Umno leader makes his exit in October.

Kit Siang shows no sign of retiring. His website churns out two to four press statements a day.

Karpal has also begun moving about in Penang in what local reporters think is a hint of his electoral intentions.

Part of DAP's inability to break out of its rut must also be attributed to the leadership of Kerk who succeeded Kit Siang as secretary-general after the latter was defeated in the 1999 polls.

It has been a daunting task for Kerk right from the start. First, there were the outsized shoes of Kit Siang's that had to be filled, and then there was the political doldrums that the DAP had sunk into.

But perhaps his biggest hurdle has been the emergent clout of PAS and Keadilan.

The DAP has been eclipsed by the political flair and tactics of these two fellow opposition parties. On the opposition bench in Parliament, MPs from PAS have stolen the thunder from DAP MPs both in terms of issues and the standard of debate.

The DAP also found itself surrendering the opposition leadership in Parliament to PAS, which has the most numbers of MPs.

Kerk is a decent and diligent politician and his worldview has matured tremendously in the years since he has taken on the secretary-general's job. He is extremely pleasant and approachable but he has been less than inspiring.

"He makes a great lieutenant but DAP needs a general," remarked a reporter who covers Parliament.

Kerk recently caused a flutter at Guan Eng's 42nd birthday when he likened the latter to a dragon that would come back. He went on to say that Guan Eng could even become an MP and the party secretary-general.

Both men have known each other since their undergraduate days in Monash University, Australia, and some have interpreted Kerk's remarks for willingness to step aside for Guan Eng when the time is right.

Still, politicians will be politicians and it is difficult to see Kerk letting go of power so easily, not even for his former university mate. His supporters say his push for the three-term limit on top party posts would suggest that he intends to say on for a while longer.

The next general election will determine the future of the party as well as that of Kerk, who will be leading it in his first polls as secretary-general.