

04/03/2004

All eyes on Kit Siang, Karpal show

Chow Kum Hor

A comeback bid by DAP stalwarts Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh is on the cards in this general election, stirring interest on both sides of the political fence, writes CHOW KUM HOR.

GERAKAN secretary-general Chia Kwang Chye has been shuttling between Kuala Lumpur, his place of work, and Penang, his political base, more often these days.

"I spend a lot more time in Penang now," says Chia, who is Energy, Communications and Multimedia Ministry Parliamentary Secretary. Uppermost on the mind of the Bukit Bendera MP is the general election.

Chia knows that no amount of rhetoric or third-party assistance can beat the touch of an MP personally attending to the woes and grouches of his constituents. With the possibility of DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang and deputy chairman Karpal Singh contesting in Penang, Chia says he has to be on his toes.

Chia defeated Lim in the 1999 general election by a razor-thin majority of 104 votes in what was dubbed the "Battle of the Secretaries-General" (Lim was then DAP secretary-general).

Kerk Kim Hock, who replaced Lim as secretary-general, recently confirmed that Lim and Karpal - both considered synonymous with the party - would be fielded, although he refused to disclose their constituencies.

Lim was a founding member of the DAP. He first contested in the 1969 general election and was Opposition leader in Parliament for almost a quarter of a century, from 1975 to 1999. Karpal had served as State Assemblyman and MP in Kedah and Penang and positioned himself as a vocal orator who is also well-versed in Malaysian constitutional law.

Karpal was also vanquished in the 1999 general election, losing the state seat of Datuk Keramat and the parliamentary seat of Jelutong, which he had held for five terms. A comeback bid now for Lim at 63, and Karpal, a year older, seems an uphill task to many. But not for them.

"Both Lim and I still have fire in our bellies. We are only in our early 60s and it is a complete misconception to relegate both of us to political retirement and oblivion," Karpal was reported to have said.

But is the DAP, which suffered one of its worst electoral defeats in 1999, experiencing a dearth of talented young people within the party that it simply cannot do without the ageing duo?

At a time when Barisan Nasional parties like Umno, the MCA and Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak are undergoing leadership renewal and rejuvenation, why are Lim and Karpal still soldiering on?

In Umno, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has taken over the party's helm, and with it, the country's prime ministership, from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad last October. The MCA also saw a transition of leadership with 48-year-old Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting named party president last May.

Indeed, Lim and Karpal, throughout their long political careers, had incessantly called on BN leaders like Dr Mahathir and former MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik to step down. Ironically, the two are now seen to be clinging on.

"I wonder when people like Kit Siang will keep to their word of wanting to step down. He has been saying that he wants to quit for some time already," says Housing and Local Government Minister Ong, who was only 13 when Lim contested in his maiden election in 1969.

After the 1995 general election, when the DAP failed in its bid to

capture Penang through its Tanjung III project, Lim took responsibility and offered to resign as DAP secretary-general. But the party central executive committee, over which Lim has an iron grip, immediately rejected the resignation.

Lim had also pledged not to contest in Penang after three failed attempts - in 1986, 1990 and 1995 - to wrest control of the State. But in the 1999 general election, he not only reneged on his vow but stood, unsuccessfully, in two constituencies in Penang (Bukit Bendera and the Kebun Bunga state seat).

After the disastrous showing at the polls, Lim was determined to quit his secretary-general's post, which he did, but only to be made chairman by the central committee.

Whether the two resignations were genuine or not, Lim has since shown no sign of having entered the last lap of his political life. If anything, he has, since taking over the DAP chairmanship, significantly elevated the stature of the post through his public criticisms and comments.

The old warhorse has reinforced his aura of irreplaceability with a low tolerance for party dissidents. In the late 1990s, former MPs Fung Ket Wing, Wee Choo Keong and Liew Ah Kim, who took part in the KOKS (Knock Out Kit Siang/Karpal Singh) campaign, were purged.

Using their incumbency and party machinery, Lim and Karpal have over the years jealously guarded their party posts, and by extension, the claim to contest in the general election. This, in turn, further entrenched their leadership in the DAP.

But this protectionist mentality on the part of Lim and Karpal hampers the infusion of young blood into the DAP, which some say has lost much of the lustre it possessed in the 1980s, when the party was reputed to have commanded one in five popular votes.

Kerk, however, disagrees. The Kota Melaka MP says "many new faces" would be nominated for the general election. "DAP is not sidelining younger members in favour of veterans. We have many young, able members and they will be given an opportunity."

Penang-based political scientist Dr Lim Hong Hai says political parties should have a good mix of young and seasoned leaders and one should look beyond one or two personalities before jumping to conclusions. Even DAP Bandar Klang Assemblyman Teng Chang Khim, a harsh critic of the party leadership, says the duo's experience was invaluable not only to the party but to Malaysians in general.

"I have asked him (Kit Siang) to resign from his party post in the past. In fact, I still maintain that. But I support his candidacy for the general election. Few Opposition leaders can match his experience and understanding of the system of governance in Malaysia," says Teng. He says he will give his full support if Lim were to win in the election and is nominated to be Dewan Rakyat Opposition leader.

But can Lim and Karpal regain the "YB" before their names?

An MCA leader says the two veterans' appeal is confined to those who are in their 40s and older. "The younger voters - and they form a large chunk of the voters in the electoral roll - find it difficult to identify themselves with Lim and Karpal," he says.

Still, Gerakan's Chia is not taking the comeback bid of the DAP stalwarts lightly. "They may tell voters that this is their last election and hope to win some sympathy votes. They may even go for broke by only contesting in parliamentary seats," he says.

Just how well Lim and Karpal will fare in their ninth and eighth elections respectively (out of the 10 general elections since Independence) is hard to determine. The interplay of their personalities, political ideologies and national and local issues will decide if the two

veterans still have what it takes to make the electorate's cut.