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MCA, Gerakan make peace as general election looms

Chow Kum Hor

THE sincerity of the MCA and Gerakan in working together will be tested yet again in the Chinese heartland of Penang. Can the two parties help deliver the votes in Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's home State? CHOW KUM HOR writes.

PENANG Bagan Jermal assemblyman Tan Sri Dr Sak Cheng Lum has been very open about his impending retirement from active politics.

While there is a general reluctance on the part of MCA leaders to give up their elected positions, the Penang MCA adviser has no qualms about telling people that he is calling it quits come the next polls - which is expected to be held soon.

"It is a genuine desire to retire and make way for the young. I have spent a very long time in politics. I will help the party and the Barisan Nasional win big in Penang in the next election," says the doctor-turned-politician.

Dr Sak, having served as Penang executive council member for more than a decade, was a key figure not only in the MCA but also the State BN, often thriving in the ever-changing dynamics of inter-BN party politics.

After the 1999 general election, Dr Sak, then the State MCA chairman, was instrumental in "head-hunting" two Gerakan assemblymen to increase the MCA's representation in the legislative assembly.

This was part of the MCA's bid to win the coveted Penang chief ministership - which it lost to Gerakan after the watershed 1969 general election.

When the BN leadership decided that Gerakan, despite having fewer seats, should keep the State's top executive post, Dr Sak spurned the offer to be made a State executive council member.

After all, having been a central figure in the running of the party, Dr Sak was tipped to be made the Chief Minister had the post returned to the MCA.

As the next election draws near, the focus will be on whether the MCA-Gerakan rivalry of the post-1999 election will come to the fore.

After all, the prestige of keeping the chief ministership in the only State in Malaysia with a Chinese-majority population is too tempting for both Chinese-based parties.

As it is, the balance of power in the legislative assembly is tipped marginally in favour of not Gerakan, but the MCA.

MCA won nine seats in the 1999 general election but now has 11 following the defections of Lim Boo Chang (Datuk Keramat) and Lim Chien Aun (Bayan Lepas).

Gerakan has eight assemblymen, Umno has 10, and MIC, Pas, Keadilan and DAP, one each.

Following the Election Commission's redelineation exercise, there are seven new State seats and both parties have their eyes on them.

As a Gerakan leader puts it: "There are seven new State seats and we hope to get eight!"

Gerakan secretary-general Chia Kwang Chye, however, is confident that despite talk of the old rivalry resurfacing, maturity and goodwill would prevail when it comes to allocation of seats.

"As we can see in the past few months, it is possible for both parties to co-operate, especially with talks of a proposed MCA-Gerakan merger. We want to and we can minimise the possibility of sabotage," says Chia, who

is also Parliamentary Secretary of the Energy, Communications and Post Ministry.

Penang MCA chairman Wong Kam Hoong also has similar views. He says both parties have given an undertaking to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to work closely together.

And so far, the Bayan Baru MP says the parties' joint activities (the MCA and Gerakan recently organised a State-level Chinese New Year open house) show that all is well in Abdullah's home State.

Or as an MCA central committee member says: "When both parties have committed to Pak Lah (Abdullah) about unity, nobody wants to spoil it. And nobody would even dare."

Besides, even if the MCA does win more seats than Gerakan in the general election, it is unlikely that the chief ministership will go to it.

In the aftermath of the defection of the two Lims, the then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was also BN chairman, had said that even if Gerakan were to win only one State seat in Penang, the chief ministership would remain with Gerakan.

The then MCA president, Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, had no choice but to publicly accept this slap in the face, putting paid to MCA's 30-year ambition of recapturing Penang.

"In any case MCA leaders are resigned to the fact that regard-less of how many seats we get in Penang, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get the CM's post. So, the question of sabotage and playing the numbers game does not arise," an MCA central committee member says.

But Chia does not want to appear complacent. He says it is wrong to take the post for granted, and that the party's track record in managing the State is more important.

In fact, Chia says the State BN machinery should focus on ensuring a thumping victory in Penang and not waste resources on inter-party one-upmanship.

The DAP, the largest Chinese-based opposition party, is trying to make a comeback in the State.

In the 1990 general election, the DAP won 14 seats in the Penang legislative assembly while BN had only 19. With three more seats, the DAP would have wrested control of the State.

Since abandoning the opposition alliance in September 2001, the DAP had tried very hard to woo the Chinese voters who in the 1999 polls, were spooked by its alliance with Pas.

"There is always the fear that the DAP may want to elicit sympathy to garner votes in Penang," says Chia who defeated DAP strongman Lim Kit Siang in the last election for the Bukit Bendera parliamentary seat.

In any case, the DAP's glory days of the 1980s appear to be behind it as the party has not thrown up any new, young leader within its ranks who could capture the imagination of Penang voters.

DAP secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock recently announced that Lim and deputy chairman Karpal Singh were again listed as candidates for the general election, despite having been involved in elections for more than 40 years. Both Lim and Karpal, in their 60s, are the DAP's "great hope" in Penang against much younger professionals and politicians from the BN. Many of the BN candidates were not even born when Lim became an MP in 1969.

The DAP's disagreement with Keadilan over seat allocation will also hurt the party's attempt to win in Penang.

Even the State Umno is confident that any misgivings MCA and Gerakan had about each other could be sorted out when both face their common enemy in the polls: the Opposition.

"I attend State-level Wanita BN meetings. To me, MCA and Gerakan can

work very well with each other and other component parties," says Penang Wanita Umno head Datuk Saripah Aminah.

And it is this sense of goodwill that the BN is banking on to deliver a convincing victory in Abdullah's home State.