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Delegates focused on preparations for next polls and role of party in 21st

Patrick Sennyah

PREPARATIONS for the next general election and the role of Gerakan in the 21st century were the emphasis of the party's 32nd National Delegates' Conference which ended yesterday.

Despite being a multi-racial party, the majority of Gerakan's members are Chinese, and one of the concerns expressed by delegates was whether Gerakan would face obstacles in reaching out to the voters, considering the impact of the recent Team A-Team B crisis in the MCA.

"To the voters, it is secondary that we are from Gerakan and not the MCA. As far as they are concerned, we are from Barisan Nasional ...," said a delegate.

Considering this, party president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik acknowledged that the only way to ensure a convincing victory for the BN was to bury the hatchet between the two parties and foster a good working relationship.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his opening address on Saturday also touched on this and urged both "brothers" to set aside their differences and work together.

"Though Gerakan is referred to as the 'younger brother', Dr Lim is a seasoned politician and has years of experience behind him, while the MCA leadership is still considerably young.

"I feel that for both parties to work together, there should not be an issue of which party is bigger and has more ministers, but what one can learn from the other," said another delegate.

He said the MCA leadership should be willing to learn from the more senior ministers as the issue now was no longer of personal interests, but the overall performance of the BN coalition in the next general election.

It is definitely timely for both parties to put their differences behind and heed the advice of Dr Mahathir to work together, putting aside the issue of the Penang chief ministership.

"The more the two parties squabble with each other, the more the ground for Opposition parties, especially the DAP which is looking to make an impact in Penang again."

Both parties should leave the issue of seat allocation to the BN leadership and heed the advice of Dr Mahathir, who said on Saturday that the matter would be discussed in the BN spirit when the time is right.

The tussle for seats would indicate that politicians were interested only in more seats rather than the interests of the people.

As Dr Lim pointed out, unless there is sincerity on the part of both parties to work together, the "cold war" between the MCA and Gerakan would continue to persist and perhaps even spell a poor general election performance for the two.

On Gerakan's preparations to play a more effective role in the future, delegates were reminded of the different kinds of challenges, especially with the dawning of globalisation and the importance of changing their mindsets to face this.

"Being a multi-racial party, Gerakan's role is becoming more and more challenging and unless delegates are willing to open their minds and accept changes, they may find the party's role diminishing in future," said a delegate.

Delegates were also reminded by the party president not to rally for "projects" and positions in and out of the party.

"Gerakan has so far maintained itself as a very disciplined party and I hope all delegates will play their roles in ensuring this for the future," said Dr Lim, adding that the amendments to the party constitution were all done with the party's future role in mind.

Overall, the 32nd Gerakan NDC was a tame affair. The true multi-racialism of the party was reflected when delegates of various races recited pantun during their debate, which till now was a culture only seen at Umno general assemblies.

Dr Lim also stressed the importance for the Government to preserve public security, including efforts to increase the strength of the police and other security forces.

Racial tolerance was also debated at length by some delegates who said this was the cornerstone to the country's success and that all political parties should work to preserve this.

The party president and delegates alike called for the rejection of Pas-style extremist politics, claiming any adoption would lead to the destruction of the country from within.

Gerakan also reiterated its support for the Prime Minister's declaration of Malaysia as an Islamic state and for the Vision School concept.