

01/02/2003

Fighting for survival

Habhajan Singh

KERK Kim Hock's position as the secretary-general of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) is not exactly the envy of many. More so as the once strongest opposition political party prepares for the next general election, possibly the most crucial in its history.

Some say Kerk lacks the firebrand rhetoric or the charisma of party leaders of yesteryears. But even if he did, it may not be enough to make inroads into the next general election.

For years the flag bearer of national opposition politics, DAP is at a crucial crossroad. It fared badly in the last two general elections. Close to being disastrous, actually. In Parliament, it occupies less than a dozen seats. 'Another third consecutive debacle will have serious impact on the party,' cautioned an internal party document circulated to members at its national conference in January. The once biggest opposition party is today playing second fiddle to Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS).

Talking to DAP leaders, one senses the lack of excitement for the coming national polls due by next year. They see an arduous task ahead. Well, for opposition sympathisers, this is old news. General elections have always been an uphill task in prying votes in a difficult environment. Time, the media and the state machinery have never been on its side. Incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN) candidates get more assistance here.

After the severe beating of 1999 - the last general election - DAP leaders today are no longer in a gung-ho mood. Then, the Chinese-based party had joined forces with PAS, Parti Keadilan Nasional (Keadilan) and Parti Rakyat Malaysia to form the Opposition Front. Just four years ago, they were taking the high and mighty stand of making a good showing in the election. In DAP's case, it was dead serious in capturing Penang.

But the strategy to wage battle alongside PAS - yes, the party intent on turning secular Malaysia into an Islamic state - backfired. The Barisan coalition, with media backing, easily broke the weak backbone of the Opposition Front. The DAP was crushed. It managed to secure a mere 10 parliamentary seats. In Penang, only one of its candidates was elected to the state assembly. PAS fared much better with a record 27 Parliamentary seats. In 1995, DAP had partnered Semangat 46, the-then Umno splinter spearheaded by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. At that time, it won only nine seats. 'DAP alone cannot bring about real political change,' reasons Kerk. 'That is why we took the decision to team up with Semangat 46 and the Opposition Front.'

Once bitten, twice shy, they say. DAP has learnt its lesson. Politics, at times, leads to strange bedfellows. But jumping into a partnership with PAS was a big no-no with the non-Malay voters. This time around, the party is steering clear of any coalition with PAS. This rules out DAP joining the Barisan Alternatif as PAS plays an important role there. However, DAP is not shy of working out an electoral pact to ensure straight fights with BN candidates. In fact, last October, DAP had written to Keadilan to begin seat negotiations. 'On PAS, our decision is clear,' says Kerk. 'There will be no cooperation.'

Is the DAP serious about not working with PAS? Are they not secretly working behind closed doors to forge some common understanding with the party? 'Politics should be in the open,' Kerk tells Malaysian Business. 'It involves transparency, emotions. If we have said that we will not be working with PAS, it means we will not be working with them.'

The DAP leadership last met its PAS counterpart at the Kuala Lumpur Park Royal Hotel on Sept 22 last year. On that day, the partnership was officially dissolved.

With the increasing tempo of election talk, opposition parties too are making early preparations. Last month, PAS hauled up all senior divisional office bearers for an election briefing. DAP has yet to go that far, although party officials say early preparations are already in the pipeline.

'We have begun our preparations ... but it has not gone into high gear yet,' says Kerk. The party's headquarters in Petaling Jaya is not yet littered with election-related stuff. That will be some time from now. 'We expect the election in July this year. But, if they choose to, they can have it as early as April.'

Can the DAP ever return to its glory days of 1986 when it won 24 seats? After two electoral debacles, the party has begun some serious soul searching. Change is a word that is quite often heard from its leaders these days. 'DAP must forever remain young and around,' asserts Kerk. 'This is the prime concern. Hence, the need to change.'

One obvious change came when Lim Kit Siang resigned as secretary-general in 1999. Today, the one-time national opposition leader remains as party chairman. When met at a recent party forum, he declined to talk on party matters. 'I would rather leave it to Kerk,' he says. Lim's departure from the party is not a change to shout about. After all, he had been holding the top post for some three decades. Also, his making way for new leaders came after a devastating electoral performance. So, is that it?

Not quite, Kerk assures party supporters. For a start, the party's national conference made a significant amendment to its constitution. The post of the secretary-general, the party's most powerful post, now comes with its wings clipped. A person can hold the position for no longer than three consecutive three-year terms. Recently, some quarters in the MCA also mooted a similar idea. 'You could say we are setting the trend,' quips Kerk.

However, he agrees that the DAP is still struggling to attract younger supporters. A continuous dearth on this score is already showing. The party is still very much dependent on older leaders. 'This gap in leadership is going to hurt the party in the coming polls,' says one political observer.

Asked about the challenges, Kerk highlights what he calls BN's 'three trump cards': terror, religion and gratitude. 'The past election tactic of BN in appealing for voters to vote for stability, certainty and strength will now come in the form of terror,' he argues.

While DAP leaders may decry the gratitude card - where BN leaders will call on the people to support the party as a show of gratitude to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - they do not underestimate the sympathy card. 'They have gone from talking about forming a government to the possibility of being wiped out,' says one political observer. 'Surely they will try to pry some votes on that card.'

One word of caution on such simplistic seat-count analysis. While facing a tough time crossing the finishing line - in terms of actually winning seats - DAP has been garnering votes. In the last national polls, it got close to 831,000 votes, or 13 per cent, of total votes. Barisan Nasional wrapped up the elections with 3.75 million votes (57 per cent). DAP's performance, in terms of votes, saw a slight improvement from the 1995 general elections. Then, it obtained slightly above 722,000 votes (12 per cent) with Barisan Nasional bagging 3.89 million votes (65 per cent).

On a personal note, the reluctant secretary-general has also undergone some trying times. Kerk has just pulled through from cancer. He underwent

an operation last April, but will have to wait for a full five years before he knows if the disease has been cured.

On the political front, however, DAP will not be able to wait for another five years. Its moment of reckoning will dawn much sooner than that.