DAP shows 'Malay face' as party targets Umno
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Urgings for DAP to shed its Chinese-centric image and embrace more Malay members have been a staple message since the party's rise in 2008 but something was visibly different at the party's convention today.

The difference was probably most felt among some of the Chinese-speaking elderly DAP members who had complained they could not understand "90 percent" of the speeches.

The apparent gulf between the party's elderly members and its mostly young speakers who spoke at the convention in Subang Jaya was perhaps symbolic of the transition the party was undergoing.

Speeches at the DAP convention in Subang Jaya were predominantly in the national language, peppered with Chinese, English, compared to its previous more Mandarin-oriented tone.

But the changes were not only confined to speeches as there were a visible number of Malay delegates, ranging from a pakcik clad in jubah to a middle aged men sporting a kopiah or women with tudung.

The sight was unusual for a party that had often been attacked by the ruling coalition as being "Chinese chauvinist".

The gradual change of the party's face in just a matter of years is perhaps facilitated by DAP's tendency to place potential leaders into key positions regardless of seniority.

'Young DAP Malays make debut'

At least three states, namely Selangor, Pahang and Penang were represented by young Malay leaders to speak at the conference.

The young Malay speakers were no tokenism stunt either, as they were matured and took cognizance of the challenges facing a growing multi-racial party.

"We cannot have a party where Malays fight for Malays, Chinese fight for Chinese, Indian fight for Indians and no one knows who fights for Sabah and Sarawak.

"We need to instil every member regardless of race with the party's ideology which is social democracy," stressed Selangor delegate Edry Faizal Yusof.

DAP's aggressive bid to correct its lack of Malay members for a self-proclaimed multi-racial party also likely stems from the fact that the second largest party in Parliament had won

almost every Chinese-majority seat as well as those with substantial Chinese population.

If the party hopes to expand further, its only option is to move into areas with significant Malay population as well as seats in Sabah and Sarawak, and this requires the party to re-brand itself.

DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng in his opening speech reiterated that the "next stage" for the party was to move into semi-urban seats which has a larger Malay population.

"We must convince Malays that DAP, as one of its governing parties in Pakatan, would never hurt the interests of ordinary Malays but instead, deliver a better life for all Malaysians, Malays included," he said.

This path is set to put DAP, which traditional rival was MCA, on a head on collision with Umno, the country's largest party that comprise purely of Malays and some bumiputera from East Malaysia.

'Set sights on Umno'

Young DAP leaders at the conference were well aware of this, with Johor delegate Wong Shu Qi, who is also Senai state assemblyperson, urging the party to "forget" MCA, MIC, Gerakan or other minor BN parties and set its sights on Umno.

"But are we to compete with Umno in terms of race,religion and royalty? That is Umno's agenda which we should not fall into.

"Our party's ideology of social democracy has never had anything to do with race... we must fight for good policies," she said, adding that DAP was now a "party in transition".

DAP insiders told Malaysiakini the party's move to amend the party's constitution to expand its central executive committee position from 20 to 30 is also aimed to not only increase women representation, but provide more chances for Malay leaders to make into the top posts.

DAP's moves to re-brand itself for Malay votes is also in some small part guided by an increasingly unreliable PAS which had in the past helped DAP to capture some Malay votes in the Pakatan Rakyat framework.

Criticism among DAP delegates against PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang was aplenty due to his absence from the Pakatan leadership council which had made the coalition difficult to function.

Hadi's name was never brought up throughout the convention but several leaders alluded to him, including Perak delegate Wong Kah Woh asking leaders with a penchant for "veto-ing" Pakatan's decision to quit their party.

However, whether DAP can succeed in capturing significant enough Malay support and stand on its own remains to be seen.

Malays joining DAP, remains a taboo, even though the party is slowly trying to break that perception, as Mohamad Shaipol Ismail can testify.

"When we join DAP, we are seen as traitors (by the Malay community)," said Mohamad Shaipol who admitted that he had to think things over several times before joining DAP.

However, Mohamad who joined DAP in 2008 said he has had no qualms with the party and has served as a councillor with the Seberang Perai Municipal Council for two terms.

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