

**Penang CM post: The fight is on
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Penang Chief Minister Dr Koh Tsu Koon's elevation as Gerakan president has ignited a political buzz over who would replace him as state leader.

As the party's acting president, Koh would have to move up to federal politics to strengthen his position and spearhead the party at the national level.

Among the names mentioned to replace Koh in Penang include Gerakan vice-president and state secretary Dr Teng Hock Nan and secretary-general Chia Kwang Chye.

Local Barisan Nasional and opposition leaders have concluded that Koh would have to take up the challenges of federal politics and become a cabinet minister.

"Otherwise, it is detrimental to him and the party," said Penang DAP secretary Danny Law Heng Kiang.

It is learnt that Koh has been eyeing the Batu Kawan parliamentary seat and is expected to contest there in the next general election.

Gerakan has been providing the chief minister for Penang, the only state in the country with a non-Malay Muslim chief minister, since storming into power in the 1969 general election.

"Penang will surely have a new chief minister after the general election," said a prominent Gerakan leader, who declined to be named.

Teng - the favourite

The Chinese press has been running a series of stories on Koh's imminent foray into a federal post and possible successors for chief minister.

Koh's trusted lieutenant, Teng, is the front runner to become the state's fourth and Gerakan's third chief minister, provided BN retains the state after the next general election.

Teng's political career has been impressive.

The Pulau Tikus state assemblyperson won his Gerakan vice-president post with the highest number of votes (1,256) in the last party election.

He has been a state executive councillor since after the 1999 general election. He was also the Penang Island Municipal Council president between 1995 and 1999 and the party whip at the state assembly between 1990 and 1995.

Since Penang is the bastion of Gerakan's strength, the acting president would prefer to have his trusted aide as chief minister to strengthen his national leadership.

Sensing this, Teng's arch-rival Deputy Information Minister Chia is leaning on Umno - the 'big brother' in BN - to help him out.

The chief minister may come from Gerakan's ranks, but it's an open secret that Umno calls the shots in Penang.

Umno's grip over the state has slowly strengthened in the past 17 years while Gerakan's political power in Penang has eroded under Koh's leadership.

During the 1995 general election, the DAP campaign platform was "Koh: CM without power." However, DAP suffered its worst electoral defeat that year. But since then, Gerakan has lost grounds to its BN ally, MCA.

Real power

Now, a majority of Gerakan members tacitly admit that Umno, and not Gerakan, has been the real power in the state since 1990.

This was not the case when former Gerakan founder president Dr Lim Chong Eu was chief minister between 1969 and 1990.

"Umno would not cross the line then," said a veteran Gerakan politician.

Koh succeeded Lim after the latter lost to DAP stalwart Lim Kit Siang for the Padang Kota state seat in the 1990 general election.

Although Umno's support could be crucial to strengthen his position, Chia is also aware that it can pose a problem.

It is learnt that he recently appealed to the Chinese press not to "highlight" his good ties with Umno.

A party insider said Chia knows that Gerakan members would not support a chief minister candidate with strong links to Umno.

Besides the two, state Gerakan assistant secretary Lee Kah Choon has also been tipped as a possible candidate for the chief minister's post.

However, his chances are said to be remote since his political master, retired president Dr Lim Keng Yaik, no longer wields any influential power in the party.

Despite their rivalry, Teng and Chia have something in common. Both defeated Kit Siang for the state and parliamentary seats respectively in the 1999 general election. This led to the DAP supremo's departure from Penang politics.

According to an online poll conducted by Penang Watch, Teng is the favourite. He has received 16 percent of the votes, while Koh and Lee received eight percent each. Chia, however, only got four percent.

Another 11 percent wanted either a MCA or DAP chief minister.

The tussle for the chief ministership could disrupt Gerakan's election preparations and this can prove to be a boon for their rivals, namely MCA and DAP.

MCA is anxious to regain power in Penang, which it lost to Gerakan in 1969.

However, political analysts believe the party's chances vanished when former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad refused to concede to MCA's claim to the chief ministership after the 1999 general election when the party had more state seats than Gerakan.

MCA had 11 seats while Gerakan had nine when two Gerakan state assemblypersons, Lim Boo Chang (Datuk Keramat) and Chong Eu's son, Lim Chien Aun (Bayan Lepas) crossed over.

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