



**Curse of power in Penang Gerakan
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COMMENT In the 1969 general election, the chief minister position was the icing on the cake for Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia's successful capture of the state government from the Alliance coalition led by MCA.

It is fair to say that the party, under the leadership of Lim Chong Eu (*right*), had contributed significantly to the transformation of the state economy from massive unemployment to one of the brightest rising stars among the newly industrialised economies in the region in the 70s and 80s.

Penangites' indebtedness to Chong Eu's contribution had created massive goodwill for the party and kept the largely ineffective and weak leadership under Koh Tsu Koon in power until the 2008 general election.

However, the chief minister position had turned into a curse for the party in the last general election. Taking for granted the people's support for the party since 1969, the party leadership had allowed the nomination and selection of a candidate to replace Koh at the state leadership to turn into a 'musical chairs' nightmare.

It was a total insult to the voters when Lim Keng Yaik announced that whoever among the candidates, namely Lee Kah Choon, Teng Chang Yeow and Teng Hock Nan, to gain the highest majority will succeed Koh as the next chief minister. Gerakan lost all the parliamentary and state seats it had contested.



At the last general election, Chia Kwang Chye had expected to be fielded in a state seat and eventually take over from Koh as the top state leader. But he was asked to defend his parliamentary seat which he grudgingly accepted. Since then, Chia had accused both Keng Yaik and Koh as the 'black hands' that were responsible for him being sidelined in the last general election.

Koh (*left*) had openly preferred Hock Nan to succeed him for at least a term before the mantle was passed down to someone else. However, Hock Nan was deemed to be too 'old' and unsuitable by the BN leadership led by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Towards the end of the campaign period, another Teng (Chang Yeow) had emerged as the frontrunner and he was believed to have received the blessings of both Keng Yaik and Abdullah.

Rivalry cemented

Although it is not fair to blame the four candidates over the controversial tussle which had contributed significantly to the decimation of Gerakan in Penang, it had cemented their rivalry which has resulted in the current leadership crisis in Penang Gerakan.

The tussle focuses on who is more suitable and apt to lead the party into the next general election in Penang. The person who can successfully wrest power from Pakatan will be the



appointed chief minister of Penang. This is the curse of power in Penang Gerakan.

At the last state party election in 2008, Chia had offered himself for the post of Penang Gerakan chairman and he had hoped to reconcile with both Koh and Keng Yaik to endorse his candidacy.



It was rumoured that he had instructed his brother to sue the authors of a book on Gerakan which was highly critical of both Koh and Keng Yaik in order to distance himself from the book. His detractors alleged that the lawsuit had brought more publicity to the book which was highly critical of the two 'black hands'. The allegation had further complicated his relationship with them.

Chia was surprised by the late foray of Hock Nan (*left*) into the state chairman race. Hock Nan's decision to contest was seen by Chia's camp as another attempt by both Koh and Keng Yaik to stop him from becoming the state chairman. He lost to Hock Nan by a mere 10 votes.

Although Chia was appointed as a vice-president at the state and national levels, he has kept his distance from party activities and meetings in the last two years. His absenteeism was criticised and questioned by several party members and leaders. Most of his supporters had refused appointments into key bureaus in the party.

Left with half a party

Hock Nan was left with half a party to lead. Ironically, the other half which had refused to cooperate and accept the new leadership is now criticising him for not being able to unite and revive the party's influence in Penang.

Months after Chia's defeat, a small group of movement called "Gerakanlah Gerakan" was created to push for 'reform' in the party. Starting with some discussions and activities on how to revive political activism within Gerakan, the group has now called for the removal of Hock Nan as the state chairman.

The group claims that Hock Nan has failed to provide any leadership to prepare the party to recapture the state government from Pakatan.

A few sources had claimed that the Chia brothers e.g. Yong Tai and Loong Thye were behind the movement to oust Hock Nan and to replace him with Chia. The movement's sole resolution to oust Hock Nan at a soon to-be-convened Emergency General Meeting has strengthened the suspicion.

After the EGM, it is believed that the group will convey the grassroots call for the return of Chia and try to 'persuade' him to help lead Penang Gerakan. A few delegates noted the surprised presence of Chia at the just-concluded state delegates' conference which hinted at his inevitable 'return'.

Gerakanlah Gerakan has found a common ally in supporters of ex-Gerakan leader Huan Cheng Guan in Seberang Perai. Huan left the party after he was reprimanded for criticising



Hock Nan's leadership. He had crossed paths with Hock Nan over the selection of coordinators in the constituencies contested by the party especially in Seberang Perai.

State delegates who had supported Huan are expected to vote against Hock Nan in the EGM. However, it was unsure if they will throw their support behind Chia as the next state chairman.

No faction confident enough

So far, no faction is confident enough to declare victory. Hock Nan's detractors are aware that they need two-thirds support from the state delegates to oust a state chairman. This may be numerically impossible to achieve without the intervention of a higher order although it was widely speculated that Chia may have succeeded in courting another important ally, Chang Yeow, to his side.

The move to remove Hock Nan is not likely to receive a nod from both Koh and the still influential ex-president Keng Yaik.

The anti-Hock Nan faction has picked an auspicious date of 10-10-10 to make a requisition for an emergency meeting to initiate a no-confidence vote against Hock Nan. While many young couples are picking the same date to celebrate their unions, a group of Gerakan members are seeking to divorce their leader.

Whatever the outcome, the EGM is going to be the final nail in Gerakan's coffin. Any winning faction is sure to lose further support in the bitter power struggle since both sides had indicated that they will quit the party if the other side prevails.

Moreover, the appointment of Chia (*left*) to lead Penang Gerakan should Hock Nan step down is not going to help to unite the already fractious party. The animosity between the rivals is far too complicated to reconcile.

The party leadership may not endorse Chia as the new Penang Gerakan chairman. As a result, his appointment may open up yet another wound for the party.

Meanwhile, Hock Nan should have seen the writing on the wall too. His insistence to stay on to lead the party in the next general election is going to ensure another thrashing for the party especially after he had conceded a premature defeat to Pakatan. His concession is going to become his own undoing.

Only option to retire

To survive a vote of no-confidence, Hock Nan must announce his plan and timeline not exceeding six months to retreat from the state leadership and to identify a reliable team of young leaders to take over from him. His only option is to retire in grace.

As a way forward, the party should unload its political baggage and stop all internal conflicts. The era of the Chias and the two Tengs is over and the party needs to start afresh by putting their faith on a new batch of leaders who are truly sincere and passionate to lead and make a positive change. They need to recapture the spirit of 1969 by putting service above self-interest.

Without the bickering old guards, it may be easier for the younger leaders to forge a new

understanding and partnership to give Lim Guan Eng a run for his money. After all, the Lim administration is not really invincible or impossible to defeat.

The vacancy for a truly imaginative, creative, capable and transformational leadership is still open in Penang.

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