

Gerakan No 2: A battle lies ahead
Malaysiakini.com
April 6, 2007
Kuek Ser Kuang Keng

After leading the party for 26 years, Gerakan president Dr Lim Keng Yaik will step down this Sunday.

According to the succession plan mooted by Lim, he will retain his post as energy, water and communications minister while his deputy Dr Koh Tsu Koon will become 'acting' president.

While the process appears smooth, observers are however expecting fireworks at the next party polls in 2008 for the deputy president post that will be vacated by Koh.

The contest is expected to be between vice-president Chang Ko Youn and secretary-general Chia Kwang Chye.

Koh will also have to make two critical decisions:

- 1) Remain as chief minister, a post he has held for 17 years, or move to Putrajaya for a federal post?
- 2) Who will he recommend to be his number two?

The Chinese dominant Gerakan, which is the fourth biggest party in the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, is allotted a full ministership in the federal government and a chief minister post in Penang.

An observer told malaysiakini that among all the potential candidates, Chang and Chia stand the best chance to go for deputy presidency.

It is also believed that the outgoing president had endorsed Chang when he said the party needed a deputy from Perak as Koh hails from Penang.

Chang is the Gerakan Perak chief and a state exco.

The observer said this has left Koh in a dilemma, similar to what former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad did to his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when he named Najib Abdul Razak as his preferred choice for deputy premier.

"If Koh follows Lim's instruction, he would be seen as a puppet. But if he refuses, then he would be seen as going against his mentor," he said.

Meanwhile, Chia - the other contender for the Gerakan deputy president post - has strong grassroots support.

Character change

Chia, who hails from Johor, is a parliamentarian in Penang and the current deputy information minister.

However, geography could deal a blow to his political aspirations because if Koh picked Chia as his number two, this would mean all the top posts in the party and government will be controlled by Penang leaders. This will definitely cause disgruntlement among leaders in the other states.

"For the time being, he will maintain the status quo to avoid any instability. But the power struggle for number two is inevitable

"Sooner or later, Koh will have to make a decision between the two," said the observer.

Responding to a question, he said the incoming Gerakan president will be better off holding a government post.

"He has been the chief minister for 17 years. It is time for him to leave and create another political climax. If he chooses to stay, people will think he has no vision," he added.

Introducing a new chief minister could also boost BN's performance in the next general election, he said.

"Moreover, as a party president who does not sit in the cabinet, Koh would have to rely on his deputy to communicate with BN's highest decision making body

"This would not only mean giving more power to his deputy, but also slow down the response speed which is critical in political decision making," he added.

The observer also stressed that Koh, who is a soft-spoken politician, must change his character if he wants to play a role in the national level.

"He must be more decisive and tougher. Or else he would follow in the footsteps of MCA whose status in BN dropped after the leadership transition," he said.

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