

Penang: Pressure mounts on Koh
Malaysiakini.com
Jun 16, 2007
Wong Teck Chi and Ngu Ik Ying

Pressure mounts as all eyes are on Penang Chief Minister Dr Koh Tsu Koon's next political step that determines the future of Gerakan and his hold over the island state.

Since taking over the Gerakan presidency from Dr Lim Keng Yaik who retired in April this year, Koh has been torn between two choices - to stay in Penang or leave the state to take up a federal post?

The opposition is more than prepared to criticise his weak governance of the state for the past 17 year should he remain in Penang. However, the party remains divided over who is to replace Koh as the next state chief.

Koh also faces the problem of being perceived as weak as most of the decisions are made by the federal government and his 'soft' character has been manipulated by profit making sectors to gain political power.

Perceived weakness justified

Gerakan think-tank Southeast Data, Assessment and Review (Sedar) executive director Khoo Kay Peng said that Koh was not as weak as people thought despite being from an academic background.

He credited Koh for being "a gentleman" and said Barisan National's performance in Penang was better when he was the chief minister in the 1990s compared to the 1980s.

"If he does not perform well then why would people continue to vote for him?" Khoo quizzed.

He explained that Koh's leadership is subjected to Malaysia's model of centralised governance (where power is concentrated in a central authority to which state governments are subjected to).

"The state government is very much restricted by the federal government and has to rely on them for resources. Their budget is only about RM300mil and most of the lands are in private hands," he said.

Aliran writer Anil Netto agreed that most of the development projects in the state are decided by the federal government.

"When we talk about public transportation woes in Penang, we do not know whom we should blame - the state government or the federal government," he said.

Also in agreement is Penang-born political analyst Tan Lee Ooi who said the state government was very restricted in making decisions as Umno controls all the resources in the ruling coalition.

"Sometime the state government fails to get anything done because the local council has more money and resources than them.

"Hence (the state will) need help from Umno, who has more central authority, to get development projects like the monorail and Penang's second bridge," he explained.

He also said the population in Penang had gradually changed from a Chinese to a Malay majority so both Gerakan and MCA are now highly dependent on Malay votes.

Gerakan weaker

DAP's Chong Eng who is Bukit Mertajam MP said former Penang Chief Minister Lim Chong Eu had better bargaining power in making an impact on the island state than Koh.

This was because of Chong Eu's opposition background and he was invited to join BN after he won in Penang during the 1969 general election.

Penang-based NGO SOS coordinator Ong Boon Keong said the division of state seats has made Gerakan weaker and more dependant on other coalition parties.

"Gerakan is also being threatened by their own coalition partners like MCA and Umno," he said.

On whether Koh should leave or remain in Penang, Ong said Koh appears reluctant to leave but he would face great pressure from other leaders.

However, Gerakan veteran Cheah Cheng Huat predicted that Koh would definitely leave Penang.

"If he stays in Penang, the people will definitely compare him with Lim Chong Eu and he will lose," he said.

He believed that Koh would learn from the mistake that Keng Yaik had made when he choose to stay in his Perak state constituency for the past six years and ended up lacking power to make any impact.

Speculation on new CM

Cheah also commented that Koh would prefer Gerakan vice-president and state secretary Dr Teng Hock Nan to succeed him but will face stiff competition from party secretary-general Chia Kwang Chye.

"With Chia being the secretary-general, he has gone around the country to meet with grassroots and hence, has a lot of supporters.

"Besides, he is politically ambitious. If he is the next chief minister, he will become a big threat to Koh in the party," he analysed.

He said that Koh owed Teng a debt of gratitude during the 1986 elections.

"Gerakan initially wanted to field Teng in the Tanjung constituency but it was Koh who was the one who contested in the end. Teng is not a big threat to Koh," he added.

Penang MCA leaders were approached for comments by malaysiakini but they declined to say

anything as "the issue is sensitive".

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.

Source : <http://www.malysiakini.com/news/68705>