

'We cannot afford mess up in Penang'
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He is the chief of staff of the Penang chief minister's office. Although it is a powerful position, it is a voluntary job for him.

"I draw no salary. I wasn't given any perks. There's not even a chauffeur-driven car," quipped blogger-turn-politician Jeff Ooi, 52.

parliament briefing 030408 jeff ooi More than a month into the job, Ooi explained why failure is not an option for the DAP-led Pakatan Rakyat government in Penang.

"If we mess it up, we will be on the road of no return," he said.

One of his biggest worries is the lack of managerial experience among those in the state cabinet, also known as the executive council (exco).

"The state ministers - the excos - some of them have not even had the experience of running a company, let alone running a state portfolio. So that is what we are worried about, the lack of experience, and this could be a target of attack by the opponents."

To overcome the problem, he said the newly-minted government is organising in-house training on "protocol, social etiquette, handling royalty and dignitaries, down to business incumbent training having some of the excos taking MBA courses or executive management courses".

Ooi talks to Malaysiakini in a two-part interview.

Tell us more about your job as chief of staff in the CM's office.

By jurisdiction, I'm a member of Parliament; I have no official power to meddle in state affairs. The (Penang) chief minister appointed me chief of staff of (his) office.

This is for the initial period of setting up the government - to set up backroom machinery to ensure that there's proper coordination between party matters and government duties, and to facilitate interaction with the civil service.

But it is a voluntary job and I draw no salary. I wasn't given any perks. There's not even a chauffeur-driven car. (Laughs)

We were prepared for a big win (in the March 8 general election) but we never thought we would be swept into power and run the government. So this (chief of staff appointment) is an interim measure and the appointment was made on the day that the chief minister was sworn in.

It's been more than a month since the DAP-led Pakatan government has been in power. What difficulties do you face and what are the lessons you have learned?

The first one is very personal, my wife works in the MSC (Multimedia Super Corridor) in Cyberjaya and it's very hard for her to relocate without sacrificing her job. And whenever she travels overseas, somebody has to baby-sit our 11-year-old daughter. Somebody has to send her to school, somebody has to make sure she has lunch, and the next day, somebody has to make sure that she's being sent to school. It's very difficult but it can be solved gradually.

But the biggest challenge is the state government machinery. Firstly, the state ministers - the excos - some of them have not even had the experience of running a company, let alone running a state portfolio. So that is what we are worried about, the lack of experience, and this could be a target of attack by the opponents.

Number 2 is to quickly adjust our mindset from being the opposition to somebody who has been entrusted to run the government. So they have to drop their political rhetoric and get on with the portfolios to which they have been assigned.

And the third thing that we saw during the first month was the tension, intended or otherwise, between the federal and state (government).

One of the key things that we saw was the dissolution of the Penang Tourism Action Council. I think Penang is one of the four (states) where the tourism action council MOU (memorandum of understanding) is being withdrawn and the fund is going to be channeled through federal agencies.

rapidpenang bus penang transportation transport 030307Number 2, there was a wildcat decision by RapidPenang - the Khazanah-owned bus company - to withdraw their regular schedule of making stopovers at Komtar - a hub for commuters - without pre-informing the state government.

Number 3 was basically the Labour Office releasing information about the retrenchment without pre-informing the government as well. So these are the type of the rough edges, which if not managed properly, could be interpreted as the new government having no capacity or capability to run (the state).

How would you describe the state government's relationship with the civil service?

It has been cordial. I think there had been a lot of apprehension at the initial stage when there were rumours that perhaps the two municipal council presidents would be replaced, and then there would be a major reshuffle. But we took care of the rumours.

And the second thing was the restructuring of the JKKK (Village Development and Security Committees) as well as the municipal councils, and there had been lobbying for posts.

But the third thing is how federal funds are going to be channeled to the JKKK level and during the first week itself, for example, we had certain JKKK machinery like the kindergartens being closed. We have to baby-sit all these political issues, so the first month (involved) a lot of fire-fighting.

And that DAP has been accused of being unfair to the Malays in Penang...

One of the key issues on the first day of swearing in, (arose from) the chief minister's statement that Penang will be run free of NEP abuses like cronyism, corruption, and abuse of power. This was distorted by the press especially Utusan Malaysia and we wrote a protest

letter to Utusan as well as Bernama, which has apologised. Utusan has remained silent.

penang second bridge and monorail project I think we have to make a lot of effort to neutralise those negative issues. During the second week, we met with Malay contractors - about 1,002 of them turned up - to tell them what we mean by open tenders, what we mean by protecting Class F contractors. Class F contractors are basically the domain bumiputera players. So there's no issue of their interests being challenged.

We also ensure that the CM pays attention to bumiputera affairs. One of the great things that has changed is that a Chinese chief minister attended the Maulidur-rasul celebration. And we have been receiving visitors from the Kelantan government. I think that was one of the key efforts that we want to ensure that we will be running the state government as Malaysians rather than Chinese, pro-Chinese or anti-Chinese, and we will continue to do that.

You are doing three jobs - one, as parliamentarian, two, CM's chief of staff, and three, as investor relations coordinator. How do you balance all this?

I think the immediate casualty is my blog. I can't find time to sleep, I can't find time to blog. I still have about 500 SMSes during the campaign days until now, yet to be read, let alone answer.

jeff ooi weblog screenshot I think I suffered in terms of health as well because the accumulated lack of rest is getting to me. I've lost weight. But there's still a lot of job satisfaction in the sense that you are not only involved in the process where you've seen an unprecedented election result and have been a key player in it. You have a role to play in running a people's government and that comes from the PKR and DAP coalition. I think that's quite meaningful and that has sort of compensated for the kind of personal sacrifices I've made.

When Parliament convenes, how are you going to be in two places at the same time?

It's quite tough. I think for the first month (in Penang), the basic manpower has to be put in place and it's a matter of sitting in important meetings; we have an average of five per week so that is something that I have to reschedule. But basically we can still do a lot of remote contact, having fax machines, talking to each other.

I'll spend about four days in KL - that's Monday through Thursday - and Friday through weekend, I will be back in Penang. Of course, I'm looking for an administrator to take care of the daily functions but I will be more engaged in strategic planning.

tony puah Right now, we are putting up a policy paper which will form the 'compass' of our governance (in Penang). Liew Chin Tong (Bukit Bendera MP) will be taking care of traffic, Chow Kon Yeow (DAP state chief and Tanjong MP) will be taking care of crime, I'll be taking care of investments, while Tony Pua (Petaling Jaya Utara MP, photo) is taking care of the economy.

Apart from that, we are setting up a panel of advisors comprising investors and academics to help us to draw up a master plan.

Why is Penang so important to DAP?

I think this is the place where we can show how to run the state government and I think

this is also one state where you get to see that the PKR-DAP coalition works the best in terms of representation and also the posts being distributed in terms of portfolio. And before Parliament was dissolved, (Penang was) one of the earliest states that negotiated seat allocation among the coalition members.

pkrdap penang meeting 090108 group So I think we want to follow through with (that) kind of cooperation so that it becomes a showcase for the future. And I think we are taking note very seriously of the trend that we may be moving towards a two-party system. I think Penang is one of the key states. Having a secretary-general of the party to become the chief minister, I think that sort of puts Penang as a frontline state for DAP's survival as well as for future expansion.

If we mess it up, we will be on the road of no return. So we can't really afford to fail in Penang. We really have to deliver our promises.

One of the key issues which you have mentioned is the lack of experience among the excos. How can you overcome this?

First is of course to have in-house training on things from like protocol, social etiquette, handling royalty and dignitaries, down to business incumbent training having some of the excos taking MBA courses or executive management courses.

But most importantly, we have to ensure proper coordination among the exco members who have little time to look after their constituencies and the non-exco members who are cut off from executive decision-making.

lim guan eng and penang So one of the things that we do within DAP is that every Saturday (from) 3-5pm, we have a joint meeting of exco members with the CM (Lim Guan Eng, photo) who is the party secretary-general, and the non-exco members to thrash out issues faced in their respective constituencies. We borrow 'power' from the members of Parliament or even the exco members to help solve issues on the ground.

This is also a platform where issues on the ground are reflected back to the state ministers. So I think that is one of the ways that we try to make up for the lack of experience and also to share knowledge about running the government and mobilise resources to help the constituencies.

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