

Gerakan seeks to be a louder conscience for BN
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Gerakan has often been called the 'conscience of Barisan Nasional', but as its 21st national delegates conference draws to a close, the party appears to be finding its own conscience.

Several delegates told Malaysiakini that during closed door debates, a feeling of introspection took hold over the weekend as the party waded through uncharted waters.

gerakan agm 2006 koh tsu koon During the last national delegates conference, the party controlled one state government and headed several ministries. Now that all this is lost and the mood during the conference was starkly different.

"In our previous conferences, delegates usually talked about improving the party in a 'service-orientated' way. Now, they want the leadership to accept and rectify weaknesses in Gerakan and BN," said one delegate on condition of anonymity.

Umno-bashing was kept to a minimum, while there was no talk about how the party planned to recapture its 'crown jewel' Penang. Neither was there any brain-storming over how to reclaim their former parliamentary seats.

What delegates appeared to want most was to allow party president Dr Koh Tsu Koon and his newly elected team to lead the way in pressuring the BN to reform.

Yesterday, Koh made it very clear that Gerakan intended to stick with the BN in order to help outgoing Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi fulfil his reform plans.

Gerakan must now be the 'bad son'

Beneath the surface though, Gerakan plans to aggressively challenge the status quo and push for government reforms in a way which they believe the public will receive positively.

"The delegates have urged the leadership to be more vocal. That is the direction that they want," said newly elected central committee member Dr Hsu Dar Ren.

Newly elected Women's wing deputy chief Ng Siew Lai chose to look at Gerakan's new role in BN from the perspective of a family.

ng siew lai She said it now behoved Gerakan to be the "bad son", that has to speak out against other family members such as the "big brother" or "bad father" even if that meant being "disowned" one day.

"It means that as a concerned as member of the BN family, we have to criticise when we see our family members doing wrong.

"Maybe some of the family members in the family won't be happy, but it doesn't matter because in the long run, it has to be done to look after the family," Ng said.

But what if a resurgent and critical Gerakan doesn't gain acceptance with the BN family?

"It doesn't matter. Even if it makes 'big brother' unhappy, it doesn't mean we should keep quiet, that is not our way," said another delegate, on condition of anonymity.

Oppose within BN

The tone set by the delegates was unexpected.

teng chang yew 110708Even newly re-elected central committee member Teng Chang Yeow expressed surprised because the delegates had been expected to debate whether Gerakan should stay in the BN.

Over the past several months, there had been impassioned appeals for the party to withdraw from the ruling coalition because of its use of communal politics.

It was widely anticipated that the a pull-out would be fiercely debated during the national delegate congress.

gerakan agm 111008 stand.jpgBut that fizzled out after Koh and several of his central committee members deflected the issue by holding whirlwind meetings with party grassroots across the country over the past few weeks.

"Koh had asked for the grassroots feedback on the situation and many asked for a pull out. But Koh gave them an in-depth analysis of what Gerakan would be like inside and outside of BN.

"The pros and cons were explained to the grassroots and it is likely why calls for pulling out of BN is not so strong now," said Teng.

According to Teng, grassroots have been placated with promises by the party leadership to adopt a more aggressive stance on issues affecting national interest - which they believed could help Gerakan win back voters' confidence.

For now, the dust appears to have settled.

Discussions on Gerakan's status in BN is unlikely to be as heated as before and the party seems ready to zoom in on their new-found role of being a stronger critic - perhaps even to the extent of being an opposition - within the ruling coalition itself.