

Penang leadership tussle still haunts Gerakan <http://www.google.com/buzz/post>
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COMMENT KUALA LUMPUR - The move by a group of Gerakan grassroots members, identifying themselves as "voices of the grassroots" and calling for an extraordinary general meeting on Oct 10 to remove Gerakan's elected state chairman Teng Hock Nan, does not really come as a surprise.

To many political watchers in Penang, this first EGM in Gerakan's history to remove an elected leader is a result of the accumulation of unresolved issues and frustrations that can be traced back to events just before the 2008 general election.

It all started with who was supposed to be the next chief minister of Penang after Gerakan president Dr Koh Tsu Koon had left his state government position to contest a parliamentary seat.

As the party supremo, it was only natural for Koh to move up to the national political scene.

But the tussle over who was supposed to succeed him from among three potential candidates - Dr Teng Hock Nam, Chia Kwang Chye and Teng Chang Yeow - and the lack of a decisive solution on the matter subsequently brought about disastrous results for the party when it lost its Penang power base in the general election.

Referring to the proposed EGM, a party insider said the long-drawn issue involving the two Tengs and Chia, also nicknamed the "Three Musketeers", has re-surfaced.

He said Gerakan's top leadership had the opportunity to resolve the matter during the party's state election in September 2008 when Chang Yeow and other leaders supported Chia to be the Gerakan state chairman for Penang.

"At that time, the national leaders should have stepped in and worked out a amicable solution by persuading Dr Teng (Hock Nan) to allow Chia to be the state chairman instead of allowing him to contest the post. Moreover, the other leader, Chang Yeow had already agreed to Chia's leadership. They should have convinced Dr Teng to move on to national politics. However, this was not done," explained the party insider.

Hock Nan triumphed at the bitterly contested Penang Gerakan election, narrowly defeating Chia by 10 votes.

For a while, things seemed to have settled down after the party polls. But the situation took a turn for the worse again when Hock Nan was accused of placing his supporters as constituency coordinators in the state and parliamentary seats where Gerakan had lost to the opposition in 2008.

This particularly bristled those in constituencies controlled by some Gerakan leaders on the mainland side of Penang, with some divisional and state leaders claiming that they were not consulted.

"The mainland side was mostly controlled by the then Gerakan vice-chairman Huan Cheng Guan, but Dr Teng (Hock Nan) decided to put his people (as coordinators) without

consulting him on the choice and this angered Huan. This eventually led to a confrontation between the two," said a Penang-based grassroots leader who did not wish to be identified.

The height of the confrontation was when Gerakan decided to suspend Huan for three years following his strong criticism of Hock Nan.

Huan quit the party a month later despite the fact that he was one of the three elected vice-chairmen in the national leadership.

There has been talk that Huan, who is now Parti Cinta Malaysia (PCM) vice-president, has been working behind the scenes with some leaders in Gerakan to oust Hock Nan.

"If you look at the list of 67 requisitionists for the EGM, most of them are known to be Huan's men. It didn't come as a surprise as Huan is known to have a score to settle with Dr Teng. Don't underestimate his influence in the party even when he is not in Gerakan anymore," warned another Penang-based grassroots leader. However, Huan has strongly denied any involvement.

Some party members also said that Chang Yeow's relationship with Hock Nan was not so smooth after the general election in 2008 as both of them were said to have differed over the direction of the state Gerakan.

They said that Chang Yeow believed that as a leader, he (Chang Yeow) should be given a safe seat to contest in the next general election but Hock Nan argued that whoever wanted to be a leader, should take a tough seat instead.

"Both of them always clashed in the CWC (Central Working Committee) or even CC (Central Committee) meetings. It's an open secret," said a party leader.

Both Chia and Chang Yeow had also denied that they were behind moves to oust Hock Nan via the EGM.

Dr Sivamurugan Pandian, a political analyst at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), said that between the 2008 general election and now, Gerakan had not been performing its role as the opposition in Penang as it had been bogged down by internal strife.

"It's a wake-up call for all in the party who are still embroiled in the infighting. They need to re-strategise how to be the opposition and not quarrel about who should lead the fight," he said.

He attributed the persistent infighting in Penang Gerakan to the lack of attention given by the national party leadership following the dismal performance in the last general election.

"Gerakan's base is still in Penang. You cannot move out from Penang even when the party seems to be better off in Johor and Sabah lately," Dr Sivamurugan said, adding that Gerakan's national leaders had no choice but to intervene in Penang.

He felt that if the EGM was allowed to convene, it could push the party towards a situation worse than that immediately following the 2008 general election.

"Dr Koh has to solve it. If the EGM is carried out and Dr Teng ousted, how are you going to reconcile the party? If the requisitionists fail, are they going to stay in the party? The power struggle in Penang Gerakan needs to be solved as soon as possible," he said, adding that

one of the reasons why the party lost in March 2008 was because of the infighting over who should be the next chief minister.

Some party insiders argued that Dr Koh should have acted fast to suspend the entire state committee before the situation got worse.

"The problem is that he (Dr Koh) is too careful," said a former CC member, adding that under Dr Lim Keng Yaik's leadership, the entire Penang state Gerakan committee would have been suspended by now and put under a caretaker until all issues were resolved like what Keng Yaik did in Johor and Melaka.

Veteran political analyst Cheah See Kian countered that the move to oust Hock Nan only started a few months ago and was not related to the ongoing party infighting since 2008.

He believed that the tussle was between Gerakan members on the island and the mainland. The mainlanders are unhappy with Hock Nan as they claim that most of the party's activities in the state are concentrated on the island.

They also claim that they have no clue as to Hock Nan's game plan to recapture Penang although he had been the Penang Gerakan boss for two years.

Hock Nan, often described as Dr Koh's proxy and who was recently reported to have said that Gerakan had no chance of capturing Penang in next general election, had not only incensed the mainlanders but also other Barisan Nasional component parties.

If Hock Nan goes, will Chia, Gerakan's former party secretary-general, make a comeback? Chia is said to have many supporters in Penang. The requisitionists have so far not mentioned whom they want.

"If Chia declines, Chang Yeow may take over. But Chang Yeow is also the party secretary-general. He can't hold two posts unless he wants to let go of the secretary-general's position," said Cheah.

The party's national leadership has set up a team of mediators consisting of vice-chairmen Mah Siew Keong and A. Kohilan, Youth chief Lim Si Pin and CC member Gooi Hoe Hin to work out an amicable solution in Penang.

If the mediators fail, the EGM will take place on Oct 10, exactly one year after the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) also held its own EGM which saw its previous president, Ong Tee Keat, losing a no-confidence vote. - Bernama

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