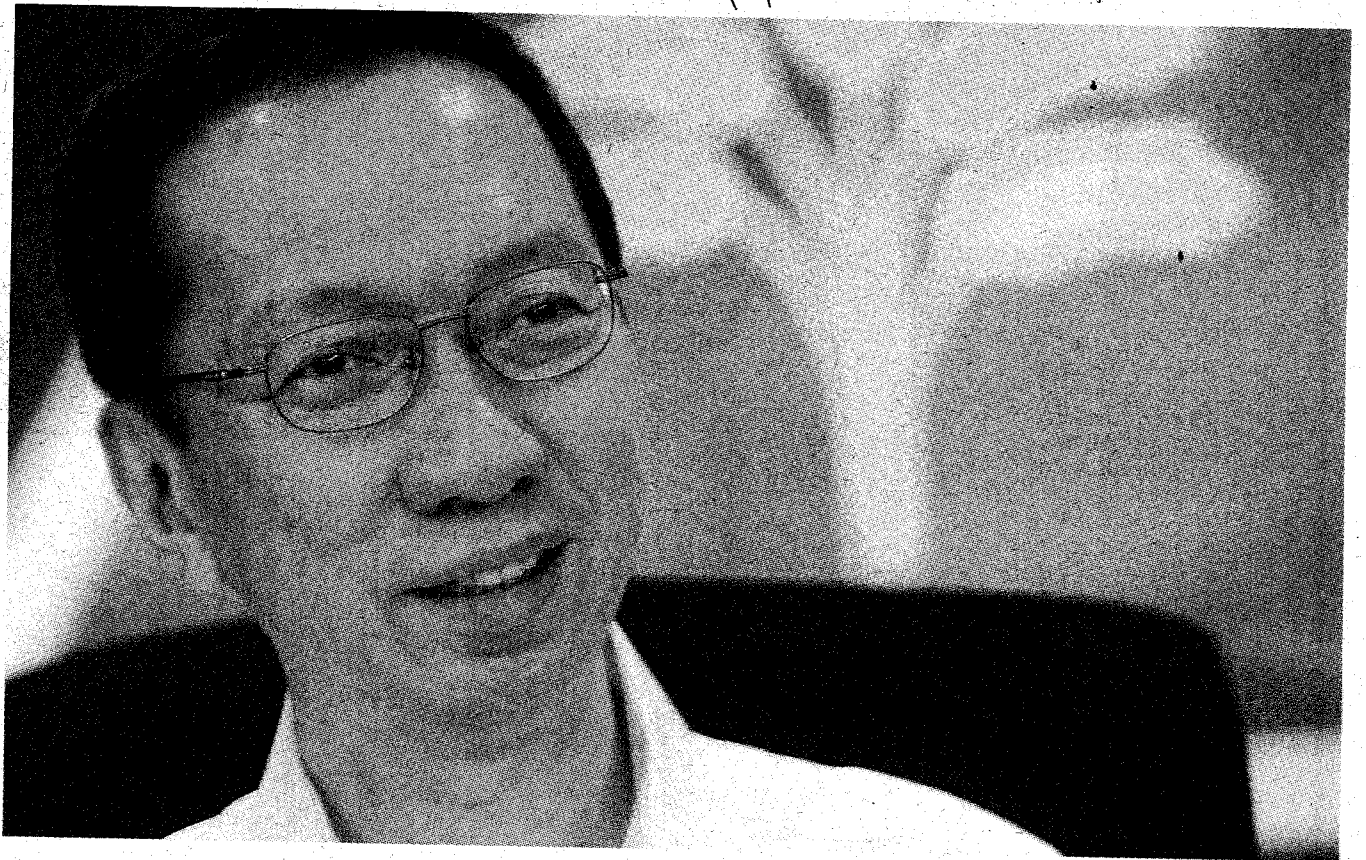


# Koh's gentle, practical ways

NST- 8/4/2007

He is the Gerakan man in the news, helming the party as acting president today. CHOW KUM HOR catches a ride with Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, who was travelling to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport after campaigning for the Barisan Nasional candidate in Machap



**Q:** When you first joined politics, did you ever imagine that you would one day be Gerakan president?

**A:** No, not at all. When I first joined the party, I was attracted to the party's ideology and the reform agenda by Dr Mahathir (former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad).

I was also drawn to the position taken by the Chinese education groups — to seek representation through the government and work from within.

At first, I did not even want to be a candidate. I just wanted to work behind the scenes. I did not join the party with the first batch of educationists on March 31, 1982.

As events unfolded, the person picked for the Tanjung parliamentary seat decided not to accept the nomination. The seat was allocated to the Chinese educationist group.

(Koh was then approached to contest.) I had to quickly join the party on April 4 and on April 8, I went for the nominations with Chong Eu (former Penang chief minister Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu).

It was a case of jumping into the fire and taking a risk as Tanjung was a DAP stronghold. I managed to win by 834 votes, which was less than a two per cent margin.

In 1986, Kit Siang (opposition leader Lim Kit Siang) defeated me in Tanjung.

For the next general election (in 1990), the party decided that I should join Chong Eu's team at the state level (Koh contested the Tanjung Bungah state seat). We did not expect Chong Eu to lose.

I did not even expect to be CM (Chief Minister) in 1990. My philosophy is that whenever there is a responsibility, I will take it up, even at the last minute.

When the CM's position was offered to me, I had to decide in two minutes.

I was asked to leave the Gerakan CC (central committee) meeting together with Cheng Teik (ex-CC member Datuk Goh Cheng Teik) as we were the frontrunners for the post.

The CC deliberated for only two minutes and the president announced the decision. I had to say "yes" out of a sense of responsibility.

As a CM, I became the vice-president of the party. I was still reluctant to take over as deputy president. Kerk (former Gerakan deputy president Datuk Seri Kerk Choo Ting) and I joined Gerakan together.

I consider Kerk a *shi xiong* (senior). I wanted to focus on my job as CM. Only in 2005 was I convinced, again quite reluctantly, to be the deputy president.

**Q:** How did you end up in politics?

**A:** It happened when I was studying nuclear physics and engineering in the United States (Princeton University).

That was the time of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. US universities were very political then.

In April 1968, I made my first visit to Washington DC. Another Malaysian and I were caught in a racial riot there after Martin Luther King's assassination.

We had to abandon the bus we were in and we ran for our lives.

That was a very traumatic experience because in the US, the most powerful and democratic country in the world, there was a racial riot, and a racial problem.

It made us think about Malaysia. I became very worried that if we didn't handle things well in Malaysia, we might end up in the same situation.

A year later, May 13 happened. I was greatly disturbed. I came back to Malaysia in June 1969. I toured both Chinese and Malay areas, where houses were torched, with some friends from Universiti Malaya. I cried.

I said to myself, "What am I doing in the labs? I should be out there." That made me decide to wrap up my Physics degree.

I decided to deal with people rather than particles. I switched to Economics, Sociology and Education in Chicago.

When I came back, I was ready to train and teach students to promote racial integration. But then I got more and more interested in politics.

**Q:** What are your plans for the party?

**A:** I will continue the struggle of Gerakan, which is committed to a non-racial approach. There will definitely be changes in style and approach.

I will outline this in my speech (today) after paying tribute to Keng Yaik (outgoing Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim

Keng Yaik).

**Q:** People compare you with Keng Yaik and say you are colourless and weak.

**A:** I am gentle and gentlemanly. People who have worked and dealt with me would know that I am actually very firm on principles. And I am also pragmatic.

That comparison to me is an honour. He (Keng Yaik) is such a political giant.

I was and have since been compared with Chong Eu. But we are two different persons and in two different periods in history.

**Q:** How will Keng Yaik play his role as an adviser?

**A:** Keng Yaik will still serve as a minister until after the next general election. As an adviser, he'll be invited to CC and CWC (central working committee) meetings.

We've asked him to attend the central committee meetings to advise the CC and the CWC on matters relating to national issues.

In other words, there will be co-ordination between him as a minister and me as the acting president as well as key leaders of the party on national issues.

We will schedule our CC meetings to enable him to attend, brief and advise us for an hour or so.

**Q:** Won't he be casting a long shadow on the party when he sits in on CC and CWC meetings?

**A:** We don't think so. We look at him as our mentor and comrade. In fact, we won't mind the long shadow because it will provide us with a perspective.

**Q:** What impresses you most about Keng Yaik?

**A:** My first impression was an early meeting when he was a minister and a reformist in MCA. I remember on a few occasions,

when a group of us travelled by plane.

Datuk Paul Leong, who was then the deputy president, was booked into first class because he was a minister. The rest of us took economy.

Paul did the gentlemanly thing by offering to exchange seats with Keng Yaik. But Keng Yaik declined.

It was a very unusual scene, the president sitting in economy but his deputy sitting in front in first class.

For Keng Yaik, position and glamour are not important.

**Q:** Gerakan's philosophy of *Bangsa Malaysia* does not seem to have caught on. Is it still relevant and how do you plan to promote it?

**A:** That it hasn't caught on in a big way makes it even more important and relevant for us to push for this ideology.

I am rather optimistic because BN is a movement in that direction, although it is based very much on communal politics.

Those who do not want to join communal-based parties can find a home in Gerakan. This will be a trend in the future. The communally-based parties will also evolve.

Something interesting has happened in the last 15-20 years in Umno and MCA.

Umno in Sabah has accepted as members Kadazan and Sino-Kadazans who are not Muslim.

In Kedah and Kelantan, there are Siamese (Malaysians of Thai origin) members. The Umno party song ends with *...untuk rakyat Malaysia* (for all Malaysians).

MCA has also opened its doors to Malaysians who have one Chinese parent.

There are those with Indian names, but who have Chinese mothers, who are allowed to join MCA.

Some of these members even hold posts in the party.

It is beginning to happen. Gerakan is not out to replace anyone. We are just out to promote this concept.