Loud Keng Yaik vows to stay mum

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PUTRAJAYA: Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik has vowed to keep "my big mouth shut" when he steps down as Gerakan chief next week — but only if party leaders do not ask for his opinions.

If they do as they want to, nothing is going to stop the loquacious leader from speaking his mind like he has for the past four decades in politics.

Malaysians are definitely going to hear from the medical practitioner whose pithy and down-to-earth comments have enthralled generations of Malaysians.

"If the party asks for advice I will give it. If not, I will keep my big mouth shut. Who am I to dictate to the party?" he told reporters at a Press conference to talk about his retirement.

For many, little is expected to change following the feisty leader's decision with the exception of the fact that he will no longer lead the party.

The Energy, Water and Communications Minister's decision to make way for his handpicked successor, Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, is not expected to change things in the party, nor in government.

While he is leaving it to Koh and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to determine his position in the Cabinet, it is unlikely that he will stay out of decision-making at national-level.

"If they want me to serve until the end of my term as minister, I will, but will not stand for elections anymore after that.

"If they want me to go, I will go. Position is not important, contribution to the party and the nation is," Dr Lim said.

The 68-year-old, who acknowledges to being "loud and colourful" will officially hand over the reins to Koh next Sunday, which is also his birthday, at an extraordinary general meeting.

Dr Lim, who was not in government for six years after becoming party chief in 1980 despite being the state assemblyman for Jalong, Perak, could not understand how he had been president for so long.

"It gives me the goose bumps whenever I think about how I survived that long. I think it is the principles I have held on to, such as putting contribution above position, and upholding the party's ideology to create a just and equitable Malaysian society."

Dr Lim said he had wanted to step down since 2000 and asked the party to look for a successor, "but it was the delegates who wanted me to stay on as president".

"It is not true for people to say that I refused to step down. It has taken seven years as the party wanted another person to take over from my deputy (Kerk Choo Ting). And that person was Koh."

As for Koh, he has nothing but respect for the leader who has carved a niche for himself with his quiet yet forceful style of politics.

"I am confident that he will do well. It is best to leave the party when it is stable."

After stepping down as president, Dr Lim plans to be more active as chairman of the Gerakan-sponsored Wawasan Open University and to set up the National Dialogue Initiative (Nadi) forum.

"Nadi will be attached to the university as a forum for inter-racial and inter-religious dialogue. I feel strongly that our multiracial society needs to be talking to each other more, not just within our own racial groups.

"Issues like national unity and creating a Malaysian consciousness or a Bangsa Malaysia needs to be continued, and Gerakan has the intellectual capacity to deal with these issues in a non-racial manner."

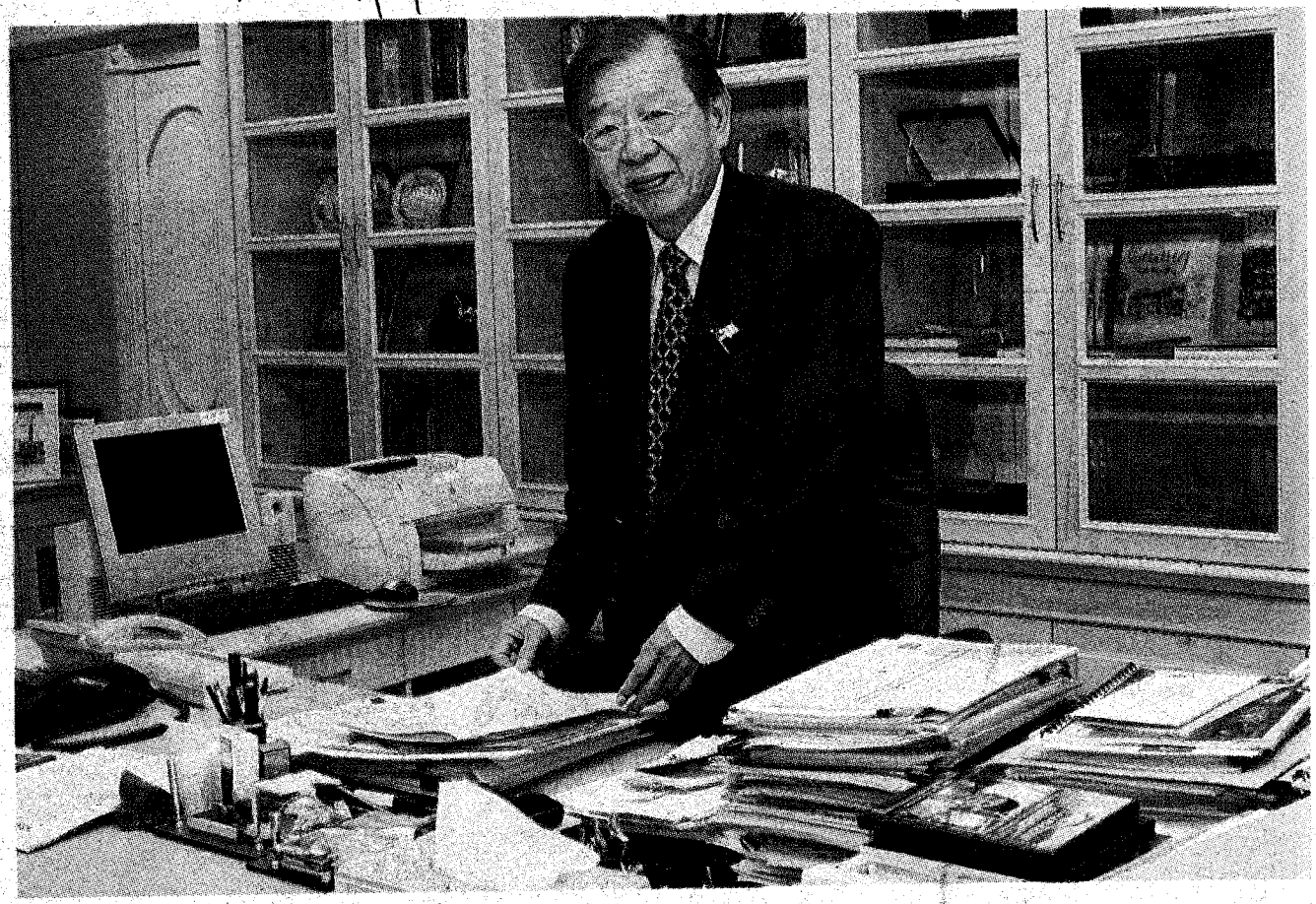
Dr Lim said he would use his experience in politics to help the various races discuss sensitive issues behind closed doors.

"Whether Nadi is effective in changing national policy, we'll wait and see. But it will be a success if we can get the different races to have a dialogue with each other about sensitive issues."

If there is anything that has disappointed him, it is that the Bangsa Malaysia spirit has not been fully achieved.

"I regret that after 50 years (of independence) we could not instil a greater sense of nationalism among the people."

His parting words: "As they say in cricket, I have had a good innings."



Energy, Water and Communications Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik clearing up his paperwork at his office as he prepares for retirement.