

LETTING GO AFTER 26 YEARS

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After 26 years and seven months, Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik is finally calling it quits – a retirement which he says is seven years late. In his farewell interview, Dr Lim talks about his years as president, the heartaches and his retirement plan.

By **WONG SAI WAN**
and **HAH FOONG LIAN**

Q: What is your biggest heartache? What have you not been able to achieve in the past 26 years?

A: It is to bring about the non-racial approach and to build a just and fair society. That is why the struggle must carry on. National unity is not at the level I expected. Our identity as Malaysians has not been achieved. It is still very much racially based.

But at the same time, we have made tremendous achievements since 1969. And I keep telling my members, don't underestimate your ability to contribute to building a Malaysian identity. Our non-racial approach has improved the situation tremendously since 1969.

Q: Now that you may no longer have direct influence on your party, what is your biggest fear?

A: What would be most frightening is if the party does not take up issues, particularly obvious issues that have to be taken up, either at closed-door level or otherwise. If they (party leaders) are comfortable in their position and do not attempt to take up any issues or controversial issues ... that would be my fear.

Q: How did you manage to stay on top for 26 years and survive so many challenges to your presidency?

A: I still don't know how I managed to survive as president for 26 years. I went through five challengers – (Datuk) Paul Leong, (Tan Sri) Michael Chen, Dr Goh Cheng Teik, (Datuk) Joseph Chong and (Datuk Seri) Kerk Choo Ting.

But I hope the members can see that the decisions were for the well-being of the party, even those hurt by the decisions.

Firstly, we have fine-tuned our party's multi-racialism to a non-racial approach of politics in solving the country's multi-racial problems and to achieve a just and equitable society.

Secondly, I've always believed in the principle that we must obey and respect the party's decision – whether rightly or wrongly, whether or not it hurts one's ambition and aspiration, or whether you like it or not.

For example, I joined Gerakan in 1973 as a high profile sacked minister from another party. In 1976, as deputy president, I was not a member of Central Working Committee (CWC) or a Barisan Nasional councillor. Yet I obeyed and kept quiet and did not say anything although I had a lot of supporters making a lot of noise.

Thirdly, position in the party or government is not important. It is contribution to the party that is more important. The members will respect you more if you continue to contribute although you have no position.

The fourth principle is to respect differences in opinions, including differences in opinions when it comes to challenging for positions, as long as it is for the good of the party.

As party president, you must show that



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DATUK SERI DR LIM KENG YAIK

you are not using your position to grab everything for yourself.

When I became president, it was not for me to grab the one and only jewel in the crown – ministership. So in 1982, I chose to remain as exco member and allowed the person who challenged me in 1980 to carry on as MP and minister.

Lastly, party leaders must prepare for a new leadership to take over. My retirement has been delayed for seven years because the party leadership was not ready to take over although I had a deputy for 15 years. Finally, (Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh) Tsu Koon agreed in 2005 and the existing deputy must have felt cheated off. I fought an acrimonious battle (with Kerk) but it was for the party.

Q: Kerk had been your deputy for 16 years; why did Dr Koh become your successor instead?

A: In 1993, I told Kerk to make way for Tsu Koon. But Tsu Koon was reluctant to be

involved in any challenge for party position until I mooted the proposal to give it to Kerk. That was when the rumbling started.

I told the members to lobby for Tsu Koon if they wanted him as president. I could see his popularity and his attitude towards the people and members.

You've got to give credit where credit is due. In 1995, 1999 and 2004 (general election), he did very well for Penang, even when you compare with (Tun Dr Lim) Chong Eu.

He lost only one Chinese seat in the three terms. In 1995 and 1999, he lost only one Gerakan seat and in 2004, he lost only one MCA seat but won 100% Gerakan seats.

So in 2005, there was no problem for me to fix my retirement date.

With his 17 years of experience as CM (Chief Minister) and his intellectual capacity, he will be able to lead the party. But on the same note, I will tell the members that his style of leadership will be different from mine.

Q: Should Dr Koh stay on as CM of Penang?

A: I have already told him that is one decision I cannot make for him. He must use his political acumen and attitude to decide. Whatever he decides, it should be good for the party and not just for himself.

Politics is not a matter of convenience. When I was president in 1982, I stayed on as Perak exco member and ran around the country. As an exco member, it was difficult to run around the whole country. It was inconvenient but I did it.

Q: Are you hinting that the person taking over from you can also do the same? That he does not need to come down to KL as Minister?

A: Yes.

Q: Who should be Dr Koh's number two?

A: I leave it to him. I have given him my views about how he should consider the Perak-Penang factor and the future.

Q: Are you concerned that the DAP may have another go at Penang in the next general election?

A: That is why I say I will spend more time in Penang. Even if I have to, it will eventually be my last contribution. Although I am not Chinese educated, I am a very powerful Chinese speaker. All the words I use might sound rough and uncouth when printed. But they are humorous and they have deep meaning. Every time I make a joke, they will say it is vintage Keng Yaik.

For example, when I was facing one of my challengers, I told people "when you didn't have a house, I gave you a house. I even gave you the master bedroom and now you want to tackle my wife. So what sort of person are you?"

The house refers to the party, the master bedroom refers to the parliamentary seat and my wife is the presidency. This is the way I tell a story and immediately people can relate to it.

Q: What will you do after you retire?

A: It is up to the party – the president and CWC – and also Pak Lah (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi). Whatever they decide, I am okay.

If Tsu Koon asks me to buzz off, I will go. If he says stay on, I will but only until the next election. I will not seek re-election.

I will also use my time to promote the Wawasan Universiti and hold dialogues among the various races on sensitive issues through the party's National Dialogue Initiatives (Nadi).