

# Koh a leader in his own right

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**PENANG:** Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon takes over captainship of Gerakan on Sunday. In terms of elected representatives, Gerakan is Barisan Nasional's fourth largest coalition party - after Umno, MCA and PBB (Sarawak's Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu).

Koh has walked a long, slippery and winding road in politics, clearing many hurdles, to reach where he is today, in the shadow of a man who had been party president for 27 years, the charismatic Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik.

In terms of personality, they are poles apart. While Lim is loud and blunt in speech, Koh is soft-spoken, gentle even.

Lim will take the bull by the horn in tackling issues, wasting little time to seek a solution; Koh rules by consensus and is often perceived to be taking his time dealing with hot issues.

On Sunday, Koh becomes acting president and Lim is poised to be adviser.

So who is Koh really?

The man was an education activist with Dong Jiao Zong (the umbrella non-governmental organisation for Chinese educationists and school committees) before being lured by Gerakan to contest Penang's Tanjung parliamentary seat in 1982.

Koh only served one term as MP before he was unseated by opposition heavyweight Lim Kit Siang, then DAP secretary-general, in the national polls in 1986.

His mentor, Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu, appointed him his political secretary to keep him from premature political rest.

In the following general election in 1990, during the heydays of the Umno challenger, Semangat 46, Koh's star rose - and it has shone brightly ever since.

Although BN was severely beaten by DAP and the mighty Chong Eu (who had ruled for 21 years) was humbled in Padang Kota, it was to be Koh's greatest political launchpad.

Koh, who had won in Tanjung Bungah, was made the chief minister at 41.

Only six other Gerakan candidates won their state seats while Umno won all 12. The MCA and MIC (which contested one seat only) lost all.

Almost immediately, critics started running down Koh, labelling him a political wimp who would not survive the next election.

Despite leading the state BN to convincing victories in the next three national polls - in 1995, 1999 and 2004 - and restricting the DAP to only a single seat in the state legislative assembly, Koh continued to be attacked.

Party insiders say Koh will continue to treat his critics the same way - ignore them and do what he must do.

Despite what detractors say, this was the same man who brought the DAP to its knees since 1995. In the process, he killed



Kit Siang's political ambitions in Penang in 1995, 1999 and 2004.

Some are now comparing him to the wily Keng Yaik.

A party observer says: "Lim took over as party president at 41. Koh took over as chief minister at 41. This means the 58-year-old Koh is actually taking over as party No. 1 with more experience than when Keng Yaik did!"

The observer adds: "It is not right, also impossible, to compare Koh with Keng Yaik. They are two very different people in character and leadership styles but both are effective leaders in their own right!"

Koh's immediate and urgent tasks from Sunday are to:

- » put the party in a strong foothold to face the next general election;
- » decide who he wants to be his deputy for a smooth leadership change; and
- » decide who should be the next Penang CM (as he is likely to move to federal after the next general election).

Party insiders say Koh is likely to leave the post of deputy president vacant until the next party elections.

Currently, party grassroots favour the deputy to come from Perak as the posts of party president and Penang CM are already leaders' from Penang.

If Koh subscribes to the Perak factor (Keng Yaik is from Perak), then he has two obvious candidates - Perak executive councillor Datuk Chang Ko Youn, 50, and Youth chief, Datuk Mah Siew Keong, 46, who is deputy agriculture and agro-based industries minister.

Perhaps, the most difficult task for Koh is to decide whom he wants to succeed him as Penang CM. Difficult because the candidates are all his friends.

Party insiders say four persons are in the running - Deputy Information Minister Datuk Seri Chia Kwang Chye (who is party secretary-general, an appointed post), Penang executive councillor Datuk Dr Teng Hock Nan (elected vice-president in the last party elections with the highest votes), Health Ministry parliamentary secretary Datuk Lee Kah Choo (an elected central committee member who secured the highest votes in the last party elections) and Penang executive councillor Teng Chang Yeow (who was Koh's political secretary before 2004).

However, behind closed doors, the party leadership are undecided over Hock Nan, 62, and Chia, 55.

Koh is said to favour Hock Nan to succeed him for one term as a reward for his loyalty to the party but age is a factor working against him. Chia's supporters argue that age would also be a factor working against him after that one term.

That puts Kah Choo, 47, the man to watch in the next 10 years in Penang Gerakan.

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