

The other side of Keng Yaik

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Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik who passes the torch to the new Gerakan president Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon today, is an intensely private person despite his very public career. Dr Lim speaks to *Sunday Star* about his family, eating Maggi-in-a-cup at night and how he could once swivel his hips like Elvis.

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Picture by **ROHAIZAT MOHD DARUS**

GERAKAN president, Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik seemed in a reflective mood, even a little sentimental.

The tough exterior seemed a little softer and he was not, as some of the reporters would say, in his usual "kungfu-fighting" mode — arms and legs flying.

It has, after all, been 26 years at the top of a party that few people had expected to last this long and this is due in no small part to his incomparable self.

He looked less gaunt than he had a few months ago despite all that chain-smoking and ignoring his doctor's advice to eat six small meals a day.

In fact, one of the first things one sees when sitting down in his office at the Energy, Water and Communications Ministry is the huge cut-glass ashtray that by the end of the interview was filled with nine stubs.

On the floor next to his desk is a large painting of a gamecock or fighting cock, a gift from an admirer of, presumably, his political style.

Another possible reason for his mellow mood could be that the evening before, his daughter's boyfriend had told him of their plan to marry.

"About time," he had said.

His paediatrician daughter will be the last of his three children to get married.

The Tapah-born Dr Lim turns 68 today and lots of things in his life have sort of come full circle, even the by-election in Machap.

The *Nanyang Siang Pau* reported about a visit that Dr Lim made to the new village in Machap 36 years ago when he was Minister with Special Functions in the Razak Cabinet.

An elder woman had gone on her knees to ask him to resolve the land grant problem.

"I remember I grabbed her hands and pulled her up," he said.

Thanks to the visit, the TOL dues for the villagers were reduced from a RM1,000 to only RM50.

He had then just turned 32, his still lush and dark hair was combed in the then fashionable curry-puff style and he sported a macho set of sideburns.

He said he was plucked out of nowhere (actually, he had a clinic in Chemor, Perak) to join the Cabinet. But the heady ascent also resulted in a speedy descent when he tried to take on the MCA leadership and was expelled in 1973 before going into Gerakan.

It was actually his love for playing the clown with sickly children brought in by their mothers that earned him his sobri-



Family man: Dr Lim in a family portrait taken during the Chinese New Year with his three children and five grandchildren who are his pride and joy.

quet, *sor chai yee sang* or madcap doctor. He was a popular doctor because he grew up in those parts and had no airs.

One patient used to walk miles to see him with her problems that included three sons who had "gone into the jungle," that is, joined the Communists, and she wanted to stop two other sons from joining their brothers.

When he visited the lady during Chinese New Year in 1995, all three sons had emerged from the jungle and one of them asked the minister to help him get a passport.

He told the man with his usual bluster: "No passport for you, you stay at home with your mother. The last time you left,

you didn't come home for 25 years."

Dr Lim, as the Chinese would say, has eaten more salt than some young people have eaten rice.

Growing up during the Japanese occupation, living through the Emergency years, riding the ups and downs in politics — all these experiences help explain the seasoned politician that he is today.

He has, as they say, been there, seen it, done it.

But one thing he has been very clear about is the line drawn between his politics and home. He is intensely private about his family and home despite such a public political life.

Few Gerakan people have been to his house and they see his wife Datin Seri Wong Yoon Chuan only about three times a year — at the party's annual delegates convention and party open houses during Chinese New Year and Deepavali.

"Only relatives and his close friends come to the house. The last time anyone political was at the house was when Tun Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) came for dinner a few years ago," said son Si Pin, 36.

Even his circle of friends is tight and small. There is a group with whom he has been golfing for years. Since moving into his Tropicana home six years ago, he has established another group whom he plays mahjong with.

Despite all these years at the top, his lifestyle is relatively simple. He often drives himself to meetings after office hours and eats Maggi-in-a-cup when he feels

peckish at night.

Despite his high energy level, he eats sparingly, barely one and half meals a day but with endless cups of Milo in between.

Breakfast is usually three to four cups of coffee (and cigarettes), lunch a bowl of noodles and he sometimes skips dinner especially if he has to give a speech during the dinner.

He is a popular speaker. "How can I not be popular especially with my big mouth and hands and feet flying all over the place?"

Like many politicians, he also sings, albeit mostly stuff from the era when he could still swing his hips like Elvis as he claimed, and jive and samba. Among his favourite karaoke songs: *Only You*, *Unchained Melody*, *Please Release Me*, and *My Way*.

He admits to being rather nostalgic the last few years and cannot stop talking about the ancestral home the Lim siblings — six brothers and two sisters — have built in Ipoh.

The house which is a replica of their mother's traditional home in Fujian Province, China, has two internal courtyards and eight bedrooms, one for each sibling.

The Lims gathered there during the recent Chinese New Year and it took a wide-angle lens to photograph the entire clan. The Lim brothers, three of whom are six-footers, used to be known as the Tapah Lims on the basketball courts of their hometown.

"Family is so important because in politics, you have a lot of fair-weather friends."

His late father had two wives and eight children from each wife. The senior Lim had property in Tapah which he gradually sold off to finance the children's studies abroad. When he died he had only one house to his name.

One sister used to be the head matron in Universiti Malaya, another is a company secretary and among his brothers is an engineer, an accountant, an architect, a geologist and what he fondly calls, a black sheep.

Today's party gathering for Dr Lim to pass on the torch to Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon is bound to be tinged with sentimentality because after so many years he has become synonymous with Gerakan.

But he brushes aside comparisons between him and the incoming president.

"Tsu Koon will have his own style. When I took over from Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu in 1980, they said, this KY will not be able to measure up to Chong Eu. I think I can now safely beg to defer."

He has given quite a bit of advice to Dr Koh, among which is to focus on real issues, not to be media-driven or to depend on an image-making team.

"No two persons are alike. I told him to be himself just as I was myself."