

The changing face of Gerakan

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THE stepping down of Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik as president of Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia throws the spotlight on one of the few parties formed with non-communal intent to rally all Malaysians behind a common platform.

And to this day it serves as an example of what is possible – and what is not – from non-communal politics with its mixed bag of success, and with a certain amount of morphing, still a party relevant to present day Malaysia.

Lim, who has been appointed party adviser, gave this parting line to his successor Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, chief minister of Penang – no need to seek advice, do what you think is right. And he urged party members to uphold, support and defend multi-culturalism.

When Gerakan was formed in 1968, its mixed group of top leaders captured the imagination of many Malaysians then and the idea that a truly multi-racial

party was about to play a key role in national politics seemed attractive.

According to the Gerakan website, the six founders of the party were Professor Syed Hussain Alatas of the University of Singapore, Mr. Opposition Dr Tan Chee Khoo, Batu MP, Selangor then and former leader of the Labour Party, Dr. J.B.A. Peter, President of the Malaysian Medical Association, Dr. Lim Chong Eu, MP for Tanjung, Penang and former President of the United Democratic Party, Professor Wang Gungwu of the University of Malaya, and Mr. V. Veerapan, legal practitioner and former leader of the Labour Party.

This was an impressive multi-racial slate. At its registration, its central committee members comprised six Malays, six Chinese and three Indians. In the general election of the following year, it captured Penang and had eight MPs, a major achievement considering its exist-

tence as a party for just a year.

But May 13 followed, the political landscape changed, and a decision by some party leaders to join the Barisan Nasional coalition and other issues split the party and reduced it to a regional party in Penang. It no longer has the majority of seats in Penang but gets the chief minister's post as part of a long-standing arrangement with the Barisan Nasional top leadership.

Along the way, the complexion of the party changed – more MCA members joined. In fact two major party stalwarts, former Penang chief minister and founder member Chong Eu and Keng Yaik were prominent MCA members.

Koh, who succeeded Chong Eu as chief minister following the latter's defeat in the 1990 elections, rose to prominence earlier as a leader of a Chinese educationists movement. Currently, the party membership is 80%

Chinese, 15% Indian and just 5% Malays and others, effectively losing its multi-racial status.

Even as Keng Yaik implores the party to pursue multi-culturalism, it looks like Gerakan is going to have a major problem shaking off a shackled image as a party which is Chinese-based and which caters largely for Chinese interests.

It no longer serves itself up as a model multi-communal party but it still may be a model of sorts in other ways. For one, it seems more professionally run than others and its leaders have a greater reputation for being more honest than that of most other parties.

Koh is widely touted as a leader who is clean and has the interests of his constituents at heart. If Gerakan can be an example to the others in that respect, then perhaps its success will be more emphatic despite its loss of multi-racial status.