

# Succession crisis rocks the DAP

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The DAP'S recent troubles show the party needs to address internal weaknesses if it wants to make an impact in the next general election, writes CHOW KUM HOR

THE spate of bad Press surrounding the DAP now is like the floods in Johor: They were unexpected, damaging and, as they say, it never rains but it pours.

Before this, DAP was said to be heading for brighter days and slated to make significant gains in the next general election.

But 2007 kicked off on a poor note for the country's largest opposition party in terms of legislative representation, when one of its two Negeri Sembilan state assemblymen quit the party.

Bahau assemblyman Lim Fui Meng, an MCA defector, resigned after claiming he was being sidelined by other state DAP leaders.

Barely one week after the surprise move, Selangor DAP saw its chairman, Ong Chee Keng, ousted in a coup d'etat bearing the fingerprints of national party leaders.

Ong blamed his downfall on a larger scheme to pave the way for secretary-general Lim Guan Eng to lead the state and ultimately stand for a seat there in the next polls.

Incidentally, Ong was Guan Eng's strongman in the notoriously fractious Selangor lineup before their fallout.

As DAP leaders went into damage-control mode, they were stung by allegations that the party was backing Batu Talam by-election independent candidate Ng Chee Pang, who is also the son of Pahang DAP treasurer Ng Kwee Lin.

So, is DAP's aura as a Chinese vote-magnet in the next general election unravelling? Can the party, which has left the opposition alliance, measure up to Parti Keadilan Rakyat, which has the allure of its adviser Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim on its side?

How will the successive misfortunes plaguing the party so early in the year play out in what is an election year for national DAP leaders?

DAP-watchers feel that the party's streak of bad luck, especially in Selangor, has brought the party's internal weaknesses to the fore.

"Whether in Selangor or other states, leadership problems always recur in the DAP," says

Universiti Utara Malaysia political scientist Prof Dr Mohamed Mustafa Ishak.

"There has not really been any leadership change in DAP. It's not even old wine in a new bottle, it's old wine in an old bottle."

Guan Eng blames the developments in Selangor on "mis-directed aggression" by some state warlords over the party's efforts to groom younger leaders ahead of the general election.

A Selangor DAP leader says: "A succession crisis is looming. The party must immediately cultivate capable leaders, especially those who can stand in the general election."

In almost every state, there is a drought of experienced leaders. The Chinese community's increasing disinterest with politics has shrunk the pool of capable leaders in DAP.

Being in the opposition certainly did not help.

The purging of former DAP top guns such as Liew Ah Kim (former vice-chairman), Wee Choo Keong (publicity secretary) and Fung Ket Wing (treasurer) has also left a dearth of members with the potential to match DAP stars like opposition leader Lim Kit Siang and chairman Karpal Singh.

The same goes for the problems in Selangor, which partly boils down to a crisis of leadership — or, in this case, the lack of it.

Bahau assemblyman Fui Meng was considered a weak leader, a point recognised even by his allies.

"But his successor (Ean Yong Hian Wah) is nothing to shout about either," says the Selangor leader.

"Ean Yong is only 28, has no track record to speak of, save for being the former political secretary to Kit Siang."

Still, lack of political leadership alone would not have accounted entirely for the crisis that rocked Selangor. Posturing for seats in the next general election is another factor.

In fact, the controversy centred around claims that Guan Eng, the former Kota Melaka MP, wants to shift his base to Selangor — which he has fervently denied.

Guan Eng says if given the chance he prefers to go back to Kota Melaka. But the problem is Malacca DAP leaders are not about to roll out the red carpet for one of the state's most famous sons.

During the 2005 Malacca DAP elections, the party's No. 1 man was booted out of the state committee in what is widely believed to have been a plot to humiliate him.

The bad blood between him and state leaders goes back a long way — back to when his detractors already sensed Kit Siang going out of his way to promote his son, Guan Eng.

This lends credence to the idea of Guan Eng moving to Selangor, a state which has seen never-ending power struggles following the death of former state chairman Ahmad Nor in 2003.

Making things worse are the aspiring leaders outside the

state also eyeing Selangor.

"We always have outside leaders knocking on Selangor's doors wanting to find a safe seat here," says Sungai Pinang assemblyman Teng Chang Khim. "Invariably, this causes some state leaders to feel uncomfortable."

Besides Guan Eng's purported interest in Selangor, a Federal Territory-based leader has also opened up a service centre in Teratai, a seat DAP is eyeing. Interestingly, Guan Eng himself officiated at the centre's opening.

For many DAP legislator wannabes, Selangor is particularly attractive as the party is expected to increase its tally of seats in the next polls.

Teng, a DAP central executive committee member, predicts the party will get one parliamentary and four more state seats in Selangor. DAP now has two assemblymen and no MP there.

With the next polls due by July 2009 drawing closer, Guan Eng admits it is quite normal for lobbying and positioning to take place.

The posturing becomes more intense given the optimism within the party rank-and-file that the DAP stands to win more seats in the next general election.

This confidence is buoyed by the inroads made by DAP during the Sarawak elections when it bagged six seats, up from one previously. For many aspiring DAP *Yang Berhormat*, the next

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election presents the best chance for them to get a break into public office.

But UUM's Mustafa says it is too early to predict electoral outcomes. "Besides, it is hard to read urban Chinese voters who are more secretive."

"The wind is blowing in the Opposition's favour in the next election," insists Negri Sembilan DAP chairman Anthony Loke.

But history has shown that excessive posturing for seats and positions can hurt DAP where it is most painful: At the ballot box. To this day, party members still blame

in-fighting — or some say, internal sabotage — for DAP's defeat in its traditional stronghold of Kota Melaka in 2004. Former secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock contested the seat.

So, how badly would all these affect the DAP?

"Of course it will hurt the party,"

says Guan Eng. "But we should not be distracted by all these and should stay the course."

But even Teng, a Guan Eng critic, is confident that the party can ride the wave caused by the malcontents and focus on winning seats when it comes to the crunch.

Besides, he says that there are on-

ly some problems in Selangor while other states are relatively stable.

Teng adds: "The damage has been done, but now is the time for the party to look into some of these weaknesses and not blow away our chances in the next election."

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