

Guan Eng sets his mind on change

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BARELY a week after being sworn in as chief minister, Lim Guan Eng is already receiving his baptism of fire - from being misquoted by media organisations which serve their own political masters, to backlash from representatives and supporters of the previous regime. It's not going to be easy, but the 47-year-old ex-prisoner tells R. NADESWARAN and TERENCE FERNANDEZ that he will walk the talk and go the distance in fulfilling his election promises.

A WEEK after the Barisan Nasional was dethroned after ruling Penang for 39 years, it seems that the biggest headache of new Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng is to ensure that the government machinery continues to run smoothly with civil servants remaining apolitical and conducting themselves as civil servants.

But then again, before he can address this issue, he has first to get it right with the media and spin doctors, who want to portray him and the new government as "anti-this" or "anti-that". Already such a situation has earned him a rebuke from the prime minister, for something, he argues, was never said by him. (National news agency Bernama has since apologised to Lim for including a reference to May 13 in a report attributed to the chief minister).

Speaking at his office in Komtar last Thursday, the DAP secretary-general reiterated that what he said was: "More importantly, we will run the government administration free from the New Economic Policy (NEP) that breeds cronyism, corruption and systemic inefficiency. We will implement an open tender system for all government procurement and contracts. We will also practise transparency by uploading information of such tender bids in an internet portal to be set up in future for public access."

Lim, the Air Puteh assemblyman, said he will take more proactive action to engage the Malay community and business groups who were alarmed over his statement on a more open

and transparent procurement and tender process.

He said just because he said Penang incorporated companies will be given priority that does not mean Malay businessmen will be shut out as all he is doing is making it a level-playing field for all - a message lost on the 3,000 demonstrators outside Komtar last Friday, but apparently understood by various Muslim groups he met at at his office the same day.

Lim said it was irresponsible for politicians, aided by a jaundiced media to play up ethnic sensitivities and reminded all and sundry that he is a chief minister for all races. His visit last Monday to Tanjung Tokong - a predominantly Malay enclave of low income earners who are to be evicted under a federal project - was largely ignored by the mainstream press.

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“If they continue to have this Umno agenda, it will be difficult (for them) to serve.”

“Don't forget I went to jail for a Malay girl!” he said, referring to his incarceration in Kajang Prison for 36 months in 1998 for sedition for accusing former Malacca chief minister Tan Sri Rahim Thamby Chik of statutory rape.

Now the ghost which was laid to rest and prevented him from seeking office in 2004 is returning to haunt him - no thanks to the twisting and turning of his views to demonise him. No matter how

hard he tries to put the issue in the right perspective, the success rate is nothing to write home about. The same can be said about his plans to have a first-class administration.

The new government, argues Lim, was brought about by the *rakyat* who wanted change. Then he counters: “The civil service must understand that they need to change to meet the needs of the people.”

Lim admitted that the change of mindset is the hardest thing to do for the incoming administration which happens to be from a political party that for the last three decades has worn the tag of “opposition” and been looked upon as the “enemy”.

He said as this perception has been ingrained into the civil service for a long time, it would not be a walk in the park to change the mindset of the civil servants and ensure that they work together with the new government for the greater good.

“With a little help from our friends and partners, public servants and of course the public, who is the boss, we need to make some headway here.

“You talk about a revolution (in the change of mindset), but we need an evolution to change minds,” he said.

He agreed with the opinion that work culture and work ethics must change completely as civil servants at large have become complacent in a laid back system that does not promote accountability.

“But it is a tough question to address. You can tell them, you can preach, just keep talking from



your heart and hope it reaches their hearts and then they would work from the heart ... but if they continue to have this Umno agenda, it will be difficult (for them) to serve. We have to plough through this,” he said, adding that the civil servants have been used to doing things their way, viewing anything contrary, as alien and unacceptable.

Lim, however, is optimistic that in due time, the DAP-controlled state administration will get the support of most of the civil servants even if some of them feel that they are beholden to the previous administration or political masters.

“I have good people who can advise me on the legal issues. We will have new systems in place where everything is transparent and accounted for,” he said.

He also stressed that the new administration is not about to undo everything that was proposed or carried out by the previous Barisan Nasional-led state government.

“If there is an expo in Sumatra approved by the previous government - I will still have to

approve it. The budget has been allocated ... but of course if I feel it is not in the best interest of the people and after careful consideration, if it makes sense to do away with it, we will,” he said.

Having said that, Lim added that contracts entered into in bad faith and has the potential to bleed the state of funds will be rescinded.

“We will deal with it on a case-by-case basis. But I need proof of (impropriety or *mala fide*) to act,” he stressed.

On a lighter vein, Lim quipped that there will be “no more *lawatan sambil belajar!*”

He said as the new administration is introducing an austerity drive, lavish projects and unnecessary overseas trips that cost the state coffers will not be approved. Among projects being reviewed is the relocation to the new state administrative building in Bayan Mutiara.

Lim also reminded the BN that although it lost Penang, it still formed the federal government and hence was obliged to continue assisting the state in federal projects and other programmes that will benefit the people.

Meanwhile, as parliamentarian (he is also MP for Bagan), Lim said he is determined to push for the Right to Information Act and declassify documents frequently labelled as *rahsia* or *sulit*.

In capacity as chief minister, he is already setting things in motion by calling for documents and files that were out of his reach when he was a “pesky opposition politician”, but now having to be made available to him at his beck and call.

“Minutes of council meetings, budgets, contracts and deals, as long as they involve people's money and welfare, we should open up the books,” said the new chief minister, heralding what many believe to be a new dawn of a transparent and people-centred state government.