

James Wong - Grand Old Man Of Sarawak Politics Dies
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KUALA LUMPUR, July 18 (Bernama) -- The late Datuk Amar James Wong Kim Min, former president of the Sarawak National Party (SNAP), once said that he would retire from politics after he made a last-ditch effort to save his party from de-registration.

And the grand old man of Sarawak politics was true to his word when he retired in 2002, irrespective of the legal outcome.

This took place after he had filed an application to quash a decision by the Kuala Lumpur High Court to de-register SNAP, which was once a component party of the Barisan Nasional (BN).

The Limbang-born veteran politician who died of a heart attack today, at the age of 89, managed to see that his effort was not in vain last year -- eight years after he had fought against the de-registration -- and today, SNAP has become active again.

Wong's determined push came when the Registrar of Societies (ROS) de-registered SNAP on Nov 5, 2002, following the party's failure to resolve its leadership crisis. Subsequently, a group of former members led by Datuk (now Tan Sri) William Mawan Ikom formed the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP).

"Regardless of the outcome of the court case, I will completely retire from politics as I have served politics for the last 50 years. I consider this (application to quash the ROS decision to de-register SNAP) as my last responsibility and duty as a politician as I want to enjoy the last few years of the sunshine that is left," Wong had told Bernama in an interview on Nov 26, 2002.

At that time, Wong, who had been synonymous with SNAP, one of the oldest political parties in Sarawak, told this writer that he was duty-bound to preside at the "last hurrah" of his political career as there had been requests by former SNAP members, urging him to use all legal avenues to resuscitate the party.

Wong managed to see the outcome of the case last year when the Court of Appeal set aside the decision of the ROS to de-register the party and it then became active politically, not as a component of BN, but as an opposition party.

What was remarkable in that interview was that Wong, the former first deputy chief minister of Sarawak after the formation of Malaysia, was already talking about retiring from politics.

He had said that he was happy to have served the country and people for more than 50 years, both in the government and opposition.

Dubbed the 'The Grand Old Man of Sarawak Politics', he was born on Aug 6, 1922. He began his political career after he was appointed a member of the Limbang District Council in 1951.

Five years later, he was elected a member of the Sarawak Council Negeri (now known as State Legislative Assembly) when Sarawak was still under British colonial rule.

After the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the then-SNAP president, Tan Sri Stephen Kalong Ningkan, was appointed Sarawak chief minister and Wong became his deputy in the state Alliance government.

Wong was also one of the members of the Sarawak delegation in the negotiations leading towards the formation of Malaysia.

When SNAP pulled out from the Alliance government later and became an opposition party, he stood as an opposition candidate for the parliamentary seat of Miri-Lubis in the 1969 general election and won. He was appointed Opposition Leader in Parliament in 1974.

Wong also won the Limbang state seat on a SNAP ticket in 1969 and subsequently, served the constituency for seven terms. He did not seek re-election in the state election in 2001.

As Opposition leader, Wong was arrested under the Preservation of Public Security (Detention) Regulations on Oct 30, 1974 for allegedly plotting to cede Limbang to Brunei. Five months later, on March 10, 1975, Wong was released under a writ of habeas corpus but was immediately re-arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA). He was subsequently released on condition that he be restricted to the Limbang district for two years.

When asked about his detention during the interview, he said in jest: "You know, I graduated from the Kamunting Camp after three years."

Besides being active in politics, Wong also took time to record his thoughts and experiences by writing several books.

They include 'A Special Breed' (1981), 'The Price of Loyalty' (1984), 'Shimmering Moonbeams' (1983), 'No Joke James' (1985), 'Buy A Little Time' and 'The Birth of Malaysia' (both 1989).

Despite all the political wrangling, Wong said he held no grouses against anyone, including top BN leaders at the state and federal level, and even described them as his friends, including those who were against his leadership in the party.

He also told this journalist that in his political career spanning more than 50 years, he would always remember that "there is no glory in politics as you will be forgotten once you retire, and you can only say to yourself...I have done a good job."

Politicians, according to Wong, should always remember that when everything was over, "there is God and Heaven".

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