

Peter Chin elected SUPP chief
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By NANCY NAIS

Party elects first non-Chinese deputy president as olive branch is offered to defeated faction

SARAWAK United People's Party (SUPP), the oldest party in the state, yesterday elected a Bidayuh, Datuk Richard Riot Jaem as its deputy president.

"I was outside when the elections was going on. When I walked back in (to the hall), everyone was congratulating me and wanted to shake my hand."

Riot, 56, the deputy foreign affairs minister now into his fifth term as member of parliament for Serian, is the first non-Chinese to be made deputy president.

Constitutionally, the second-most powerful post in the predominantly Chinese party founded in 1959, is that of the secretary-general.

The central committee yesterday elected Prof Dr Sim Kian Hui, 46, to the post. He is a world renowned cardiologist, and son of the late Tan Sri Sim Kheng Hong, a former deputy chief minister.

Dr Sim was formerly head of the Department of Cardiology and head of Clinical Research Centre of Sarawak General Hospital (SGH) Kota Samarahan before resigning to contest the April state election. He lost.

The 104-member CC, as expected, elected Energy, Green Technology and Water Minister Datuk Seri Peter Chin Fah Kui, 66, as president replacing Tan Sri Dr George Chan Hong Nam who had taken over from Tan Sri Dr Wong Soon Kai in 1996.

Unlike past presidents George Chan, Wong Soon Kai and Tan Sri Stephen Yong who led the party from 1983 to 1990, Peter Chin was never secretary-general.

The former organising secretary, won unopposed in a triennial delegates conference (TDC) bitterly disputed by deputy secretary-general Datuk Seri Wong Soon Koh who boycotted the TDC and elections.

This was the party's first elections. Leaders were previously picked by consensus.

Riot's rise came after the party suffered heavy defeats in the state elections. SUPP is now left with six assemblymen, four of whom are non-Chinese.

Among the "old" faces retained was David Teng, 52, who is treasurer, the fourth most powerful post.

Datuk Francis Harden, an Iban from Sri Aman, was previously the highest ranking non-Chinese in the party since its founding.

Harden, who had aligned himself to Soon Koh, was the deputy secretary-general II, the sixth most senior member in the previous Central Working Committee.

Other new faces in the 26-member CWC include Matthew Chen (deputy secretary-general 1), Sarikei MP Ding Kuong Hiing (deputy secretary-general II), Datuk Sebastian Ting (publicity and information secretary), youth chief Tan Kai (vice-president) and women chief Tnay Li Ping (vice-president).

In his press conference after his election, Chin said the CWC was a "good mix of old and new".

One of Chin's first acts as president was to offer an olive branch to Soon Koh and his supporters with a plea "not to give up" on the party and to "reserve" for them one vice-president and six ordinary members' posts in the CWC.

"Please do not feel you are no longer needed. Please do not feel you all are no longer part of SUPP."

Among Soon Koh's core supporters are the party's four Dayak state assemblymen -- Hardin (Simanggang), Dr Jerip Susil (Bengoh), Dr Johnichal Rayong (Engkilili), and Ranum Mina (Opar) and the other Chinese assemblyman Datuk Lee Kim Shin (Senadin).

Chin described the road to reconciliation as "tough".

He admitted that bringing Soon Koh and his supporters back into the party fold was now his "biggest worry".

"How to bring back these members to the bigger family of SUPP, that's my biggest worry."

But Chin said he would make conciliatory engagements next year over the Chinese New Year period in a series of gatherings which he dubbed "unity nights".

He said he would go to each of the boycotting branches to "get reconnected".

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