

## **Will SUPP Recover In Time To Face Next General Election?**

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**By Alan Ting**

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 9 (Bernama) -- The Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) Triennial Delegates Conference (TDC) this weekend will be watched keenly as it represents what observers believe the last chance for the party "to correct things" or continue to face a downfall in the next general election.

Going by the record in the last two state elections, the party appears to be getting weaker due to, what many believe, the problem of perceptions -- that it has failed to represent the people's voices -- and because of the internal conflicts it has been facing since 2004.

The party lost 13 of the 19 seats it contested in the April polls, including Piasau, the seat contested by party president Tan Sri George Chan. In 2006, SUPP lost six seats.

Can the party pull itself out of doldrums at the TDC and recover in time for the general election?

"I don't think they can recover in time for the next general election," said Prof James Chin, political analyst at Sunway Monash University. "The problems are just too deep for them to tackle in this short amount of time. The negative perception of the party is still there."

After analysing the manifestos of the two presidential hopefuls -- organising secretary Datuk Seri Peter Chin and Deputy secretary-general Datuk Seri Wong Soon Koh -- Chin said neither addresses the core issue that the party is facing.

Both party president hopefuls have come out with their respective plans, Wong with his "New Plan", Chin with his "Transformation Plan."

"Neither plan addresses the real, fundamental issue the party is facing, the perception that it is too weak. Both say they are going to re-organise the party but they don't address the issue that it has been perceived as too weak to represent the views of the community, particularly the Chinese," he said.

He said the battle line is clearly drawn for this party election between the supporters of two presidential hopefuls, to the extent that there have been public mudslinging and complaints lodged by some members at several SUPP branches.

"The fact that the rivalry has been brought to the Registrar of Societies (ROS) reflects the severity of the problems," he added.

To date, the Registrar of Societies has received eight complaints of SUPP branch election irregularities. Of the eight, two included police reports. As a result, ROS has issued SUPP two letters.

Chan has said he will not mediate between the two presidential candidates, but will let "the

best man win."

However, some party leaders and insiders point out that the party election, no matter how intense it may be, is still the best option for the party to revive itself, as the previous attempt through "The Forward Plan" in 2007, failed.

"There has been too much talks about the plan but nobody is willing to let go. At the end, the plan failed. The only way, as we see it, is through the party election. No doubt they will be people unhappy about it, but it is still the best platform for party delegates to decide on which direction to pursue and who should lead the party," said a party grassroots leader.

SUPP secretary-general Datuk Sim Kheng Hui also defended the party election as the best way to transform the party. Election at the Triennial Delegates Conference (TDC) would put aside the tradition of proposing a pre-arranged list for the delegates to endorse, he said.

Sim explained that delegates will be able to decide on two main proposals to change the party's constitution -- first, to have a direct election, and second, to amend the constitution to limit the tenure of SUPP ministers and office holders to two or three terms.

Currently, SUPP has a two-tier election system, with about 600 central delegates first electing members of the central committee, which in turn later elects the central working committee (CWC), which then decides who among its members will hold various posts in the party, including the party president.

This to some political observers, is a very out-dated system and that they need to change in order not to be perceived as an "old man's party".

Regardless of the outcome of the weekend election, the immediate task for the elected leaders is to decide how they are going to prepare the party to face the next general election.

SUPP's had been given seven parliamentary seats -- in Serian, Stampin, Bandar Kuching, Sibu, Lanang, Sarikei and Miri. Two of them, Bandar Kuching and Sibu, are already in the hands of DAP.

Analysis by some think-tanks and political parties already point out that the SUPP, the oldest political party in the state, is on the brink of losing more parliamentary seats in the next general election.

As pointed out by a much-respected former SUPP president Tan Sri Dr Wong Soon Kai in a interview with a local daily recently, whoever takes over the party leadership this Sunday will have a Herculean task to repair the public image of the battered party to face the opposition outside.

"SUPP is in such an unprecedented and difficult position that whatever the outcome of the coming party central election, it will be a very tough beginning for the new man (president)," he was quoted as saying.

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