

PKR mulled Tee Keat for Pandan but chose Rafizi, source says
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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 24 — PKR's leadership considered fielding MCA's Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat in Pandan for Election 2013 several months ago, a PKR source has confirmed, but the suggestion was immediately vetoed in favour of Rafizi Ramli.

The source said the consideration was made after Ong's MCA followers "sent out feelers" to PKR leaders on the possibility of him contesting on a PKR ticket, but without the former MCA president's actual confirmation, the party had decided not to take the matter seriously.

"We never actually heard from him even though his people had made representation on his behalf," the source told The Malaysian Insider.

"But there was a clear indication of Ong's, or his people's, intention. Only that it appeared he was just testing waters through his people so there was never anything really concrete."

He added that despite the matter being raised at leadership level, the party had decided to proceed with its campaign in Pandan and stick to Rafizi as its candidate, refusing to leave candidate selection to the last minute.

The source pointed out that when the matter was raised, it had also appeared likely that Ong was Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's favoured choice for Pandan.

Ong, who was deposed as MCA president by his current successor Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek during a fractious power struggle in 2010, has been the Pandan MP for five terms now.

But earlier this week, Dr Chua told reporters at a Chinese New Year gathering that the Pandan MCA division had excluded him from its list of possible candidate choices for Election 2013.

Instead, said Dr Chua, the division had proposed 39-year-old lawyer Gary Lim, the division's legal bureau head.

This was immediately denied by the division, however, and the majority of its leadership held an emergency meeting on Friday to clarify that they have yet to meet to discuss possible candidates for Pandan and had therefore not decided to propose Lim.

But PKR had predicted that out-of-favour Ong would lose his MCA ticket.

"We did expect this would happen, that Ong would be dropped. But at the time, Najib came to Ong's constituency for a visit and gave allocations and all... talk was that Ong was the favoured choice.

"So the party decided that unless there is a formal request from Ong himself, it could not entertain requests made by those claiming to represent him," said the source.

There has been heavy speculation on the possibility of Ong defecting to the opposition as the leader grew more isolated from his MCA peers over the years, but the Pandan MP never confirmed the possibility.

His open tiff with Dr Chua, however, continued to fuel the rumours and when the latter announced that his predecessor had been dropped from MCA's list, the rumours reignited.

When contacted yesterday on the matter, Rafizi, who is PKR's strategy director, told The Malaysian Insider that the issue did not come as a surprise.

He would not confirm if his party had discussed fielding Ong for Pandan, but affirmed that he was willing to exit the contest should the leadership feel that the latter was a more suitable candidate for the seat.

"I have maintained this all along and I have not changed this opinion. If there is a better candidate, whomever he or she may be, even if it is Ong Tee Keat, I would be more than happy to make way.

"The issue here is about winning in Pandan, so if there is someone else better, that must take priority," he said.

Despite the current confusion over who will finally represent Barisan Nasional (BN) in the coming polls in Pandan, talk remains that Ong is still the candidate favoured by senior leaders in Umno to contest the seat due to his personal popularity among constituents there.

Observers also believe that the best chance for BN to retain the seat is to field Ong, especially with Rafizi as Pakatan Rakyat's (PR) contender for the seat.

Rafizi, 35, who gained prominence with a series of exposés such as that on the National Feedlot scandal, is already a household name with his many appearances in the media and various opposition ceramahs around the country.

Dr Chua had deposed Tee Keat as MCA boss in a fractious power struggle in 2010 and since then, rumours have been swirling over whether the former minister would drop Ong as MCA's choice for Pandan.

In the following years after Dr Chua took the helm of MCA, Tee Keat grew increasingly isolated from his party peers, engaging at intervals in bitter exchanges with his successor, who has made his dislike for the latter openly known.

In 2008, Dr Chua stepped down as health minister and MCA vice-president after admitting he was the man featured in a secretly recorded video which showed him having sex with his lover.

He was formerly the Labis MP before the sex scandal became public. The Labis seat is currently held by his son, deputy minister Chua Tee Yong.

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