

Rising Tide

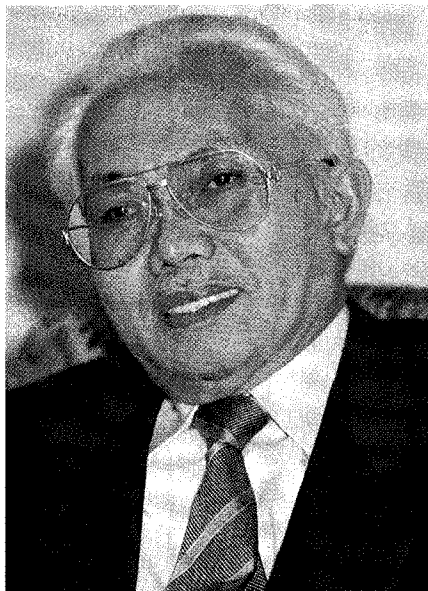
Sarawak United People's Party's president Tan Sri Dr George Chan is facing a vote of no-confidence in his leadership. Can he survive? ■ By S C Chan

SARAWAK United People's Party (Supp)'s beleaguered president Tan Sri Dr George Chan Hong Nam, 70, was probably lucky to have been able to prevent the voting on a no-confidence motion proposed by his deputy, Tan Sri Law Hieng Ding, and seconded by Central Working Committee (CWC) member Daniel Ngieng during a rowdy CWC meeting in Kuching on Oct 26. Otherwise, Chan would have had to consider his position as party president, a post he has been holding since 1997 after taking over from predecessor and former Deputy Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Wong Soon Kai.

'Chan has to go to clear up the big mess in the party,' said Law in a recent interview. But on that fateful day, when a 47-year-long tradition was broken with the tabling of the no-confidence motion against the party president for the first time, his opponents probably didn't push hard enough for a vote, after Chan rejected the motion on the grounds that it was not within the ambit of the CWC to deal with such a matter.

What emerged, after a long and heated argument, was some agreement of sorts 'to leave the motion to another day and to another committee.' The marathon CWC meeting broke off only after Law stormed out of it in sheer disgust after Chan vetoed any vote move related to the motion.

During breaks, Law, who was earlier twice discouraged from walking out of the meeting by party Secretary-General Datuk Sim Kheng Hui, told reporters: 'I want to



Taib: Chan's close ties to him are a source of discomfort to many within Supp

exercise my democratic right (to vote on the motion). But the president dare not face the voting.'

According to him, even if the constitution is silent on the question of such a motion being tabled, the rules of the meeting should apply and members can agree, either by a show of hands or by a secret ballot, to allow such a motion and debate it. Law said that he told the meeting that if the majority of the CWC members rejected the motion, then the party president should continue to lead the party. However, if the majority were

in favour of the motion, then Chan should step down.

Now, Law and his supporters will have to wait for the 110-member CWC meeting on Dec 9 to do just that, or at the special delegates conference (SDC) the following day, which has been called to discuss a number of issues its members consider critical to the party's future.

The party performed poorly in the May 20 state election, losing eight seats — mostly in key Chinese areas in Kuching, Sibul, Meradong and Bintulu — out of the 19 it contested. Now, its 100,000-strong membership throughout Sarawak wants to know whether the party has lost its effectiveness in the government as a spokesman and watchdog to protect and promote the interest of the Chinese community.

Opponents blame Chan, who is one of Sarawak's two Deputy Chief Ministers responsible for industrial development matters, for what they call an indecisiveness and a lack of collective leadership. Law also said Chan has made too many promises — which he has never kept — to other party leaders.

Others say Chan is way too close to Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud (one of his daughters is married to Taib's son Sulaiman), and many in the party have become wary of this. During last year's CWC meeting, words like *chün-kay* (relation) and *Pek Moh* ('White Hair' in reference to Taib) were used less than endearingly by some delegates when referring to Chan's ties with Taib. Some of Taib's policies, such as the uncertainties surrounding the renewal of 60-year land leases in urban areas and the seemingly high premiums payable for these renewals, the future of Chinese education in the state, corruption and state-funded projects all going nearly only to certain companies with strong political connections, have not gone down too well with the people.

Not surprisingly, Taib himself has privately complained to some close associates that 'Chan has lost control of his boys (in the party)'. But in recent times, he has also been alluding to the noise raised against the top leadership by the party's Youth Wing Chief Alan Sim, who is also a political secretary to the Chief Minister, after the party lost the post of Kuching City South mayor.

Malaysian Business has learnt from government sources, however, that the real reason for the decision not to appoint a Supp member had more to do with the party's four incumbents in Kuching — Datuk Alfred Yap (Kota Sentosa), Chan Seng Khai (Batu Lintang), Lily Yong Lee Lee (Padungan) and Datuk Sim Kheng Hui (Pending) — being rejected by the largely Chinese electorate in the last state election.

Nevertheless, the Youth Chief confronted the top leadership and demanded an explanation, forcing the party president at a recent CWC meeting to accept a proposal calling for a SDC in December. An 11-member committee, headed by the party president, is now finalising the issues to be brought up and debated at the SDC.

Up to the time of writing, the list of issues is likely to include the land lease renewals and high land premiums, Chinese education, native customary rights (NCR), especially on land, and the need for greater government transparency, especially in the tendering process for government-funded projects.

According to political observers, the leadership crisis has 'forced' the largely Sibuan-based Foochow-speaking group — including Sibuan branch chairman and state Second Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism Datuk Seri Wong Soon Koh and branch deputy chairman and Federal Deputy Minister of Local Government and Housing Datuk Robert Law Hoi Chiew — to take up the gauntlet to win back Chinese confidence and support for the party, clearly seeing that some changes in leadership may now be necessary.

The Sibuan group comprises all the state assemblymen and members of parliament (MPs) of the party from the Sibuan area. It is also linked, directly or indirectly, to at least two timber-based conglomerates — Rimbunan Hijau and KTS — which exercise some influence in the state's political power play. The MP for Lanang, Datuk Tiong Thai King, who is part of the Sibuan group, for instance, is the brother of timber tycoon and media baron Tan Sri Tiong Hiew King, the head honcho of the RH Group of Companies. Robert Lau, the MP for Sibuan, is the younger brother of the late Datuk Seri Lau Hui Kang, the founder-chairman of the KTS Group.

Within nearly five decades of its existence,

Supp has transformed from a party once infiltrated by leftist elements with socialist ideology to one that has been described as more of 'a *towkay* party' now, with strong connections to some of the large Chinese-owned timber-based conglomerates. Its CWC meetings are conducted mostly in English.

The current challenge to the party presidency is seen increasingly as a political power play between the Sibuan group, led by Soon Koh, and the Miri group, led by Chan. Says a political analyst, 'As of now, if a vote is taken on a no-confidence motion in the CWC, it could go 5% either way.' Which explains why when one of Chan's staunchest supporters Dr Soon Choon Teck — a State Assistant Minister and State Assemblyman for Dudong — 'went it alone' to announce

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his proposal to set up the Dudong branch without even informing the four units (sub-branches or service centres) operating in the Dudong state constituency, the Sibuan branch publicly condemned him and called for an explanation, while at the same time contemplating disciplinary action against him.

Chan has made it clear that he has no intentions of stepping down as president. Only the delegates can decide on his position, he has said. The votes from Kuching members will be crucial. They will probably hold the balance. The heads of the Pending, Padungan, Batu Lintang and Batu Kawah branches in Kuching are said to be behind the party president. 'But their support is a qualified one — they want Chan to state a timeframe for stepping down as party president, preferably in a year's time,

with his position as Deputy Chief Minister left to the Chief Minister's prerogative,' a source says. However, Chan has told his Kuching supporters that he is not interested in such a deal, as he intends to fight to keep his position.

Given this scenario, come Dec 9-10, unless there is a last-minute compromise, the party's leadership crisis could further deepen and may lead to irreparable damage. Taib, as state Barisan Nasional (BN) leader, who has so far declared a hands-off policy, may be forced to step in because a break up of the party could have serious implications not only for the state BN but also for him personally.

One of Taib's close associates confided to **Malaysian Business** that 'as long as Supp is still there and is still intact, it doesn't matter who leads the party'. Does this mean that as a Kuching Chinese businessman with close contacts to Supp Kuching leaders put it, 'the writing is already on the wall' for Chan?

In the event circumstances change, forcing Chan to relinquish his position in the party before his term ends in 2008, the general expectation is that Soon Koh, an Australian-trained teacher-turned-politician and a close relative of former party president Soon Kai, will take over the presidency, with the deputy president's post likely to go to the party Organising Secretary and Federal Minister of Plantation Industries and Commodities Datuk Peter Chin.

Law has announced that when the party president agrees to step down or is ousted as president, he too will step down voluntarily to give way to younger blood.

A Kuching-based political analyst says Supp's troubles at the core 'are a crisis of lack of democracy within the party and thus, an inability to undertake dynamic renewal within the party'. This is exacerbated by the fact that as a *towkay* party, it is now riddled with patronage, which is also bad for renewal since those with access to the top refuse to let go and thus bend the party to suit their purse-strings, whims and fancies.

The analyst, however, says that the only way to overcome this is to ensure that political parties are subject to dynamic leadership contests annually. 'That way, party leaders can get their mandate renewed and thus show that they are truly serving the party's needs and not their own.' **mb**