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MALAYSIA'S ELECTIONS

Gerakan changing for better or worse?

By Ooi Kee Beng

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THE Gerakan Party that has governed Penang since 1969, and joined the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition in 1973, is undergoing changes.

The party's long-time president, Datuk Seri Lim Keng Yaik, retired in April last year, handing over power to his protege and Chief Minister of Penang, Dr Koh Tsu Koon. Datuk Seri Lim is one of only three Cabinet ministers who will not contest this Saturday's elections. He served as Minister for Energy, Water and Communications,

After he announced his retirement, pressure mounted on Dr Koh to leave state politics and protect Chinese and Penang interests at the federal level. He chose to run in the parliamentary seat of Batu Kawan on Penang's mainland.

The choice of seat surprised many, and led to speculation that the Chief Minister, despite having ruled the state since 1990, felt his popularity among ethnic Chinese was so low that he would not be able to win either of the two parliamentary seats on the island currently held by Gerakan. Thus he chose a seat where the non-Chinese share of voters was highest.

But given the large number of ethnic Indians in Batu Kawan - 22.4 per cent - the seat may not be as safe as it seems. The Indian community has been showing a strong aversion not only to the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), which they had traditionally supported, but also to BN in general.

Dr Koh's opponent will be the Democratic Action Party's (DAP) Mr P. Ramasamy, a recently retired political science professor who is attracting many Indian voters.

Even if Dr Koh wins the seat, a poor showing in Batu Kawan will weaken his ability as federal minister to withstand Umno pressure.

His recent statement that Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi will decide who would take his place as Penang Chief Minister has also angered many of his middle-class supporters and made him the butt of opposition jokes.

Penang's middle-class voters are already disappointed by Dr Koh's willingness to allow businessman Patrick Lim, a close associate of the Prime Minister and his son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin, to go ahead with the gigantic Penang Global City Centre project.

Many Penangites see it as a serious threat to the island's unique way of life. Strong opposition from the island's non-governmental organisations has forced a postponement of the project.

One of the supposed favourites to succeed Dr Koh as Chief Minister was party secretary-general Chia Kwang Chye. But Datuk Seri Chia is contesting a federal seat. This makes it impossible for him to be Chief Minister.

Two other possibilities were senior state executive councillor Teng Hock Nan and rising star Lee Kah Choon. They now seem to have been surpassed by Dr Koh's former political secretary Teng Chang Yeow.

Dr Koh's apparent inability to make a firm decision has prompted rumours that Datuk Dr Teng is in reality the compromise candidate dictated by the BN leadership.

The confusing transition has left many Penangites disillusioned. Many within the party are also disgruntled with Dr Koh. Datuk Dr Teng was reported to have said that he had earlier been told to prepare to take over from Dr Koh. Should the 62-year-old veteran feel that he had been pushed aside, his supporters might choose to show their displeasure publicly.

Dr Koh and Datuk Seri Lim seem unable to decide whether to announce the name of the new Chief Minister before or after Polling Day this Saturday. Should they do it before, the party leadership might split, thus damaging Gerakan's chances at the polls. Should they wait, voters may punish the party for bending to Umno's will.

Other developments in the state may also affect Gerakan's future. The DAP is fielding its secretary-general Lim Guan Eng in Penang for a state as well as a parliamentary seat. His party, energised with new blood, is bent on regaining its former prominence in Penang.

There is also Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat. Openly allied with the DAP, it aims to deny the BN a two-thirds majority in Penang and regain the political presence that it lost in 2004.

Gerakan's internal problems are reflected in its campaign slogan, 'Reinvention'. This call for change by an incumbent party could prove harmful, especially when faced with a confident opposition that is also calling for change.

Voters in the Chinese-majority state have traditionally supported the party that promised to develop the state despite federal resistance. Gerakan, the party of choice for four decades, has

been having trouble adjusting to changing times. It now risks being surpassed by opposition parties that are doing a better job of reinventing themselves.

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