

Much ado over

**VILLAGE HEADS**

A whirlwind of change swept through several states after the general election, leaving many unsettled, particularly those closest to the ground — the village heads. Many now face an uncertain fate, write ELIZABETH JOHN, NURRIS ISHAK and JASPAL SINGH

THEY are central to the social life of every village — helping at weddings and praying at funerals.

They are the final word in disputes — solving problems and averting crisis.

Now these leaders — heads of villages and a voice of authority — are caught in a quandary.

After the recent general election, some Barisan Nasional-appointed village headmen in opposition held states have resigned, while others have stayed on.

But most, facing an uncertain future, just don't know what to do.

Take for instance Hussin Latib, the 59-year-old village headman who's chief of three villages in Selangor.

A few days post election, a sub-district head or *penghulu*, told him that all village heads in the state had been suspended until further notice.

A week later, the district officer told him to carry on with his duties as usual.

In the meantime, Hussin heard of 109 Perak village heads' plan to quit from May 1 and, in Kedah, how village heads who once answered to the state, now come under the federal government.

"We don't know whether we are being suspended, or if we have to resign. We haven't had any news from the menteri besar's office," he says.

The problem for many village heads or *ketua kampung* is that they aren't just BN-appointed,



they're party members.

In Kedah, for instance, 95 per cent of village heads are Umno members, many of them branch chiefs, says former menteri besar Datuk Seri Mahdzir Khalid.

Now that the Pakatan Rakyat has taken over Penang, Perak, Selangor and Kedah, they feel obliged to quit or do so because they can't work with the new state governments.

Then there are village heads like Hussin who aren't party members. They shouldn't have to resign, they should have a choice, he says.

"Even if they are members of Umno or other BN parties, they should remain as long as they are doing the jobs they were entrusted with," he says.

This is also Professor Dr Jayum Anak Jawan's argument.

"I don't understand why village heads have to jump the gun and resign," said Jayum who lectures in political history at Universiti Putra Malaysia's Faculty of Human Ecology.

"They're endorsed by the community. It doesn't matter which political party is in power."

Historically, the system of local leadership differs in each state but the lowest head of any geographical unit has always been the village headman, explains historian Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim.

With the introduction of the British administration system, the

village head could be elected locally but the *penghulu*, to whom the headman reports, increasingly became a member of the administration services, Khoo says.

It was only after independence and the end of local council elections that the ruling party began nominating people for local council and other positions, Khoo says.

Jayum explains that at this time, village heads began receiving both recognition and allowances from the government, thus allowing it to have an influence on the choice of village leaders.

Over time, village heads found that there would be more security and support for their work if they

had a *penaung* or patron, and this is how they started to become recruited into political parties.

Today, village heads need government recognition for the job. Without it, there's no allowance.

They are now appointed by state governments and receive an allowance of RM400 from the federal government. They also get an additional payment from the state.

This extra amount varies — those in Selangor get between RM50 and RM200 depending on years of service, while Kedah village chiefs get a standard RM50.

In Selangor, the village head is

# Link between the people and government

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automatically the chairman of the village Security and Development Committee (JKKK).

But in some states such as Kedah, there are no village heads per se. The job is done by the JKKK chairman, explained Mahdzir.

Village heads report to the *penghulu* who are civil servants. The *penghulu* reports to the district officer, who in turn reports to the state secretary.

In the 450 new villages in Peninsular Malaysia which come under the housing and local government ministry, the set-up is slightly different.

The heads are appointed by the respective state governments and serve as a liaison body between the JKKK and government. They too report to the *penghulu* but are often directed by the district officer for certain community functions, says the ministry.

But at the end of the day, the



Prof Emeritus Khoo Kay Kim

duty of all these heads remains the same – they provide leadership at the local level and link people to the government, says Jayum.

Following the fall of the BN state government in Kedah, Mahdzir announced that all BN-appointed village heads would resign effective April 1 and they would be appointed as federal JKKK members.



Prof Jayum Jawan

The new Perak and Selangor governments said they would hold elections to choose new village heads and until then, both states have told the village heads that they can stay.

Perak Menteri Besar Mohammad Nizar Jamaluddin said the elections would be conducted from next month by the *penghulu* based on the existing guidelines for the JKKK.

"We estimate it would take about three months to carry out the elections," he said after receiving the resignation letters from several of the *ketua kampung*.

Sukiman Jalil, who is Perak Village Heads Organisation chairman, said they had one primary reason to quit:

"We are Umno-appointed-village heads and that means our loyalty is towards Umno and BN. Now that we have a different state government, it is only appropriate that we resign to allow the new government to choose its own village heads."

In Penang, village heads say they will hold their posts till year-end. In new villages, recent resignations have created a temporary state of uncertainty, says the housing and local government ministry.

It is not known how many village heads will vacate, or be asked to vacate, their posts in the

Pakatan Rakyat states. The Rural and Regional Development Ministry did not respond to questions from the *New Sunday Times*.

Statistics on the ministry's website only display the number of village heads in 2006: 1,644 in Kedah, 801 in Perak, 148 in Penang and 368 in Selangor.

If, in the end, the BN-appointed village heads in other Pakatan Rakyat-held states go the way of Kedah, villagers could have two sets of representatives, says Jayum.

One will report to the federal government and the other, to the state.

"This isn't necessarily a bad thing. It just means now there are two channels to get your views to the government."

Jayum says that there could be confusion but people would likely look at the situation objectively and think: "We'll go to the person who resolves the problem faster."