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Successful conference marks the dawn of a 'mature' MIC

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THEY trooped in and out of meetings in an orderly fashion. They conducted themselves well and exhibited pride in their party.

And they had reason to be so as the 53rd annual delegates conference of the MIC was historic in more ways than one.

There was no untoward incident and the two-day event last weekend went on smoothly, a big contrast to some previous meets where there were raised voices and protests.

Amendments were approved to give women a bigger say in the party's decision-making process. From the next annual conference, two women will automatically sit as central working committee members and the women's representation to the conference will be 35 instead of 15 now.

Prime Minister and Barisan Nasional chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad commended the party and said it truly represented the Indian community.

And Dr Mahathir had high praise for its president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, describing him as an "excellent leader" and "a politician who is not easy to match" and who was courageous, vocal and did not shy away from saying his piece which usually was blunt, sometimes creating controversies.

There was also unity displayed within the party. Deputy president Datuk S. Subramanian told reporters he had no intention of challenging Samy Vellu in next year's party election.

Another milestone was the fact that almost half the delegates spoke in Bahasa Malaysia, which speaks volumes about the type and age of delegates to this conference.

By the way they conducted themselves, it appears that the party president's desire to change the image of the MIC from that of "labour class" to "intelligent class" has a chance of succeeding.

The delegates generally stuck to the topics at hand and spoke well on several issues.

In fact, some of the delegates appeared to read out prepared points with hardly any tone fluctuation.

It is common for delegates at political party general assemblies to "sing" praises of their presidents. And there were many who praised Samy Vellu.

But only in the MIC can you find delegates literally singing praises of their president. And it happened again, attesting to the popularity of the man who has been leading the party for 21 years.

And Samy Vellu too kept his cool, although now and then he took digs at some speakers or groups which he said were working against the MIC.

Samy Vellu injected humour into the proceedings and made everyone feel good.

In the past, he would interject every now and then to clarify points or say something but this time, he kept this to a minimum.

The only major complaint from delegates was that they were not given sufficient time to speak. They asked that at the next conference more time be given to each speaker.

A total of 1,350 delegates attended the annual conference at Dewan Merdeka of the Putra World Trade Centre.

Another 4,500-odd observers, mainly branch chairmen, also attended the first day of proceedings.

It was the largest annual gathering ever but the logistics were well handled by the secretariat and MIC staff.

Samy Vellu said the overwhelming turnout was an endorsement of the party and expressed pleasure at the manner in which it went. Delegates and observers agreed this was the best ever.

Veteran Datuk V. Govindaraj, a one-time vice-president who left the party for a brief spell to form the Democratic Malaysian Indian Party and who is now back in the MIC agreed that this was the best he had attended.

"The delegates acted in a mature and responsible manner. Everything went smoothly. There were no disturbances.

"They knew their subjects well and I was delighted to see many of them speak in Bahasa Malaysia, apart from English and Tamil."

Penang delegate P. Subbaiyah said the maturity shown by the delegates reflected the leadership qualities of Samy Vellu who had managed to "turn" the party around to be more orderly.

He observed that the open praise by Dr Mahathir for the MIC and its leader was a tremendous boost for members.

Perak delegate K. Devamany said this was his ninth annual conference and the best so far.

He praised delegates for their maturity and said many of them, in particular the youths, spoke well.

Delegates spoke mainly on the dissolution of the South Indian Labour Fund last week by Parliament, the plight of estate workers and educational opportunities for Indians.

There was total endorsement for Samy Vellu's handling of the issue and support for the Government's decision to dissolve the fund.

However, delegates extracted a promise from Samy Vellu to ensure that the proposed skills training institute to help estate workers and their children on the plot of land in Nibong Tebal belonging to the fund takes off and that it truly benefits Indians.

Several delegates lashed out at those who criticised the MIC and Samy Vellu for wanting the fund to be dissolved.

In his winding-up speech, Samy Vellu explained at length his reasons for asking that the fund be dissolved.

At some points in his explanation, he appeared somewhat aggressive and issued a warning to those undermining his "efforts to improve the lot of the community".

Several delegates said Indians were still not accorded equal opportunities in education. They said that the community had to fight hard for its rights which should be given without being demanded.

Negri Sembilan delegate P. Mariayee said it was unfortunate that at the dawn of the 21st century, Tamil schools were still getting per capita grants and that it was time all Tamil schools were fully aided by the Government.

The Government was taken to task for not doing enough to help the estate population.

Even though there was some dissatisfaction with the Government, at the end of the day, they all accepted the explanation of their leaders.

Ringling in their ears were the praises heaped by Dr Mahathir and their president's call for hard work to ensure a BN victory in the general election.

So, the delegates had a reason to return home yesterday with heads held high. They knew that the MIC has matured.

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