

26/09/1999

Tense elections appeal issue successfully defused

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THE meeting began with lunch which, on hindsight, was not too bad an idea for it helped break the ice.

The host was MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik whom the Cabinet had, just a day earlier, given the mandate to deal with an emerging controversy over the election petition launched by 11 Chinese organisations in connection with the approaching national polls.

At Dr Ling's end were Chinese leaders from the Barisan Nasional, namely, Gerakan's Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik and SUPP's Datuk Law Hieng Ding and other MCA leaders.

The petitioning side, known as the Working Committee of the Chinese Malaysian Organisations' Election Appeals, was represented by, among others, its chairman Quek Suan Hiang and secretary Ser Choon Ing.

And as they settled down to lunch, it was hard to believe that for the past month or so, these very same people had been arguing, sometimes rather heatedly, over the petition in the Chinese vernacular papers.

But more surprises were in store. The meeting, which began shortly before 2pm, ended barely one-and-a-half hours later, with both sides wearing broad smiles.

Dr Ling looked as pleased as Punch as he told the reporters milling around outside the conference room that there had been a "meeting of minds" as both sides found much to agree on regarding the petition.

Both sides had also agreed that they had to work together to realise the objectives of the petition, some of which could be achieved in the short term and others in the longer term.

Parts of the petition, Dr Ling said, could even be carried up to the Second National Consultative Council for discussion.

Another political coup for Dr Ling? Well, sort of, although some say it is more a sign of how far the Chinese community has come since the heat and fury politics of the 1970s and 1980s.

The 17-point election petition has been the subject of extensive debate in the Chinese vernacular papers, with all Chinese associations being urged to support it.

The Barisan Nasional had not taken kindly to what it perceived to be an implicit threat against those who did not lend their backing to the petition; Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made it clear that the Government would not bow to this sort of pressure.

The MCA was under a great deal of pressure to endorse it. The party said it agreed in principle with the petition but stopped short of endorsing it.

Actually, the DAP has also not endorsed it either for as its Selangor chief Teng Chang Khim says: "We don't have to endorse it ... this is to be presented to political parties to implement when they come to power. But we have made a point of accepting it as part of our manifesto."

To be fair, the group behind the petition has not exactly compelled Chinese associations to back the document.

What has happened is that as one Chinese association after another came forward to endorse the petition, an inevitable pressure built up on those who held back.

In that sense, the controversy was less a result of the content of the petition than the fact that several Chinese groups, considered cornerstones of the Chinese community, had declined to endorse the

document.

Apart from MCA, the big names holding back had included the Allied Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCCIM) and the Federation of Chinese Assembly Halls (FCAM or Hua Zong as it is known among the Chinese).

ACCCIM said it had its own channels for bringing views to the Government and made it known that it did not like the signature campaign style of the petition.

FCAM's stand was less defensible. FCAM is the umbrella body for 13 Chinese Assembly Halls which boast an affiliation of some 5,000 Chinese associations with about 100,000 members; in fact, its Chinese reference, Hua Zong, translates literally as "association of Chinese organisations".

Thus, when FCAM withheld its endorsement, it appeared that the mothership had lost touch with its satellites.

To complicate matters, one of FCAM's members, the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (SCAH), was among the group of 11 which prepared and launched the petition.

FCAM was invited but declined to join the group with the rather peevish excuse: "How can the son ask the father to come to the meeting?"

Some attribute FCAM's stance to its leadership's close ties with MCA.

Others say FCAM was piqued that Dong Zong (the influential Chinese School Committees Association) had been allowed to assume the leading role in the petition; both FCAM and Dong Zong see themselves as the tai-kor or big brother of Chinese cultural life.

"The leaders' stand does not always reflect how the ground feels," says SCAH youth head Tang Ah Chai.

The Chinese media has likened the situation to three horses pulling in different directions. And if there is any loser in this issue, it is the FCAM which has been rather poorly featured in the Chinese media.

Meanwhile, Ser, a lawyer and one of the architects of the petition, says: "We are not out to confront the Government."

Even the term "election appeals", which Ser and his colleagues have picked to describe the petition, has been deliberately toned down; the Chinese term da xuan su qiu actually translates as "election demands".

According to Ser, the original intention was to hold a dialogue with key Chinese groups to discuss issues of concern to the Chinese.

A total of 14 key Chinese associations were invited to form the core group but eventually, only 11 stayed on.

At the same time, the dialogue idea evolved into a lengthy petition encompassing a variety of issues: national unity, democracy, human rights and justice, corruption, economy, privatisation policy, education, environment, new villages, housing, women's rights, media, police, social services, workers' rights and indigenous peoples.

It was a rush job, actually, because the group had thought elections would be called in September.

Nevertheless, the petition swiftly gathered momentum from the day it was launched on Aug 16 and more than 2,000 Chinese organisations have since endorsed it.

"The Government had to take notice of it," says a former Chinese schoolteacher who is all for the petition.

But until Dr Mahathir commented on it, the debate had been confined to the Mandarin-speaking community.

The launch of the petition had excluded the Malay and English Press and an English version of the petition was hurriedly released to this other segment of the media only last week.

This was one of the major drawbacks in what was otherwise a comprehensive and well-thought-out document.

The other, according to the non-endorsing groups, was the timing of the petition and the way the group behind it had gone about doing things.

Parallels were drawn to a vividly similar document drawn up in 1985. It was bound in a little red booklet and endorsed by 27 Chinese guilds and associations shortly before the 1986 general election.

The 1985 declaration went down badly with the ruling party which viewed it as a veiled attack on various government policies ranging from the NEP to Chinese schools.

Some government figures viewed it as blackmail: agree to it if you want our votes.

It also did not help matters that relations between the MCA and several influential Chinese cultural groups were then in the doldrums.

It is obvious that Dr Ling wishes to avoid anything reminiscent of the 1980s experience, hence his swift and decisive response this time around.

Says MCA vice-president Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn: "Dr Ling has taken a very conciliatory line. And I think they can also see demands like Chinese schools are things that MCA has delivered or is working hard to deliver."

Moreover, the socio-political climate now is a far cry from that of the 1980s.

The Chinese sentiment at this point in time is overwhelmingly pro-establishment, the MCA is riding a political crest and a great deal of Chinese discontent over business, education and employment opportunities has dissipated over the last 10 years or so.

And, of course, mention has to be made of Dr Ling's political style which has always been to avoid confrontation, to work on issues where there is common ground rather than focusing on issues of contention.

"The 1985 joint declaration was a flop," says a well-known Chinese business figure.

And he warns that this current petition may end up likewise unless its sponsors "show more finesse" than the 1985 group.

He adds: "Every group and individual has the legitimate right to petition but the method is very important. It can backfire if you are too aggressive or even too passive ... or if you humiliate the other side.

"Neither should you expect 100 per cent victory. This is very much about balancing competing interests ... it's not a zero sum game. And many of the demands are a long-term thing."

Sound advice, given the Chinese community's frustrating experience with previous petitions.

But, the desire of the present parties to maintain a co-operative spirit on this election petition suggests that the Chinese may have learnt well from the past.

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