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A fleeting sigh of relief

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A DAY after Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik retracted his resignation as Transport Minister, he received a bouquet of flowers at his office in Damansara from Kontena Nasional with the message 'Nice to have you back'.

To his detractors, the message that came with the flowers may seem irrelevant as they are still wondering if his offer to resign was 'serious' in the first place. Instead, there are views that it was a 'masterly performance' from the veteran politician to quell dissent within the party. And if it was so designed, it has produced the desired results.

Even the strongest of his critics have retreated into their cocoons. A critic admits that there is nothing much they can do now except to lay the ground work for the party elections in 2002. The question the dissidents within the party will put forward to the delegates in future is whether Ling was serious in his decision to quit.

But in politics, even one week is a long time, let alone two years. Ling's on-off resignation is a clear example. From his 'final' decision to resign on May 22, Ling - the MCA president since 1986 - announced two weeks later that 'I have made up mind ... I will continue to serve.'

By offering to resign and forcing the party stalwarts to coax him out of his decision, the doctor is in firm control of the party for now. Just a week before that, his detractors were quite open in being optimistic that Ling's support within the party was waning. So, what happens two years from now during the party elections is anybody's guess. In the meantime, the debate on Ling's resignation rages on.

Ling refused to respond to questions from Malaysian Business on the reasons for his change in stance and whether all was well within the party now that he has returned. 'No questions,' was his answer when approached at his office a day after his resignation.

At a function later in the evening in Larut, Perak, Ling was reported to have said that he wants to forget the issue of his resignation. He may want to forget the issue, but it is unlikely that his detractors in the party will want to do the same. By offering to resign from his Cabinet post as Transport Minister, Ling turned the tables on his deputy Datuk Lim Ah Lek and his followers who are at odds with the party president.

Facing mounting pressure from the party's central committee, which is dominated by Ling's supporters, Lim suddenly found himself thrust into the thick of a campaign to get the party president to stay on as Transport Minister.

The rift between Ling and Lim started after the general elections in November last year over MCA appointments to government posts. At the centre of the controversy are Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and Datuk Chan Kong Choy, two cadres seen as the future leaders of MCA. Ong is aligned to Ling and Chan hails from the same state as Lim, Pahang.

Ong's appointment as full minister over Chan, who was appointed a deputy minister in the prestigious Finance Ministry, was seen as the party president putting his favoured candidate on a higher pedestal in the race towards who will be the future leader of the party.

Besides the issue of the criteria used in selecting party leaders for government posts, the other thorny problem besieging Ling was his detractors' allegations that he failed to ask for an additional government post for the party, following its sterling performances in the past two general elections.

Thus, by offering his post in the Cabinet to Chan, a supporter of the party president contends that Ling was trying to pacify the dissenting faction in the party. He was also making up for his failure to get additional government posts from the government.

'He was serious in his decision to resign,' asserts a supporter who holds a government post. 'Ling felt that in other countries, the leader of the party does not necessarily hold a government post. So, he felt that it could also be done here.'

'That is why he did not indicate his decision to anybody except his family. At his level of politics, besides his family, there are not many people whom he can confide in,' says the supporter. 'Even his closest friends had no idea. However, a few days before he made the decision, he appeared relaxed as though he had found an answer to his problems.'

However, his solution put Chan and Lim in a spot. Chan could not possibly take up the offer of a ministership at the expense of the party president. If he had done so, he would be chastised by the delegates in the next party elections in 2002.

Fully aware of the circumstance, Chan was among those who flew to Perth to persuade Ling to reconsider his decision. Besides Chan, it is learnt that Ong and a few others also flew to Perth to meet Ling during his holiday there.

Ling's supporters contend that the party president later retracted his decision after realising the implications that it will bring about. The main reasons:

- * without a Cabinet post, Ling would not be able to meet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on a regular basis to channel the grouses of the Chinese community,

- * Ling's influence in getting allocations/projects for the Chinese community will wane,

- * in terms of protocol during government functions, Ling will go down the hierarchy below ministers and deputy ministers, thus, putting his subordinates in the party in awkward positions, and

- * to make amends for putting Chan in a difficult position.

To Ling's supporters, the reasons hold water. But try telling that to his detractors within the party. 'It is difficult to fathom how a politician of Ling's stature could not have realised the complications when he made a major decision like quitting the government post,' says a pro-Lim supporter. 'Also, nobody, at anytime, called for his resignation. It will not solve the existing problem within the party.'

Supporters of Lim say that the deputy president was put in a spot and went out of his way to ensure Ling retracted his resignation letter. A Lim supporter says that the decision to send a delegation to see Ling and the Prime Minister was made by the central committee, dominated by sympathisers of the party president.

The strategists in Ling's camp, fully aware that the 'resignation episode' will haunt the party president, also have a game plan to thwart any moves to discredit their leader. A supporter says that the view that will be put forward is that Ling's offer to quit was a way of managing the success of the party. 'When Ling took over, he was managing a crisis in MCA. The party was split. Membership was less than 400,000,' he says. 'Now, membership is more than 800,000 and the MCA has done well in the past two general elections. As the party has done well, expectations for more government posts have risen. But it is impossible to get more (government) posts,' he says.

Ling has come full circle in his leadership of MCA. From managing a party in crisis, he is now handling the party at a point when it has tasted unprecedented success. In his 14 years at the helm, he has played

his cards well.

The card he played most recently is a telling success. For now, he has put the party in order. He is unlikely to see any brick-bats being hurled at him publicly. But the underlying currents will be there and the direction in which they pull will become clearer as 2002 approaches.

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