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Ling - rejuvenated leader with a difference

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MALAYSIAN Chinese and other Malaysians welcome the decision of Dr Ling Liong Sik to remain in the Cabinet because they know that solidarity within the MCA, BN and the Government is all important.

Dr Ling's action makes him clearly and transparently a master politician and reinforces his dominance within the MCA. It takes all sides to agree to maintain political peace within the party and what the MCA needs and hopes for is goodwill on the part of everyone to resolve remaining misunderstandings.

How fully I agree with Dr Ling's decision. Somehow, my intuition did not desert me. I knew from the beginning that Dr Ling would not leave the Cabinet, which he has served with distinction for 14 years.

A senior contact in the Cabinet told me, "Liong Sik is a very good minister, an understanding colleague and easy to get along with because each of us is given proportionate space in good and bad times."

Dr Ling's statement on his decision to remain in the Cabinet appropriately reflects the feelings of his party, the Chinese community, BN leaders and the other Malaysians generally. Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, however, insisted that it was a strategic political move to resolve MCA's internal problems. Be that as it may, what will follow can only strengthen Dr Ling's leadership and the MCA. More importantly, Dr Ling's decision has been overwhelmingly welcomed and commented upon approvingly.

Dr Ling has a straightforward, patriotic honesty which has distinguished him from several of his past and current brothers-in-politics. If I can summarise about Dr Ling: He has been the "donkey of MCA, the Chinese and Malaysian political realism", and I know that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad likes and respects him. As Dr Lee Kam Heng wrote in The Star (June 4), "the MCA influence in the Government might be weakened if its president is not in the Cabinet". No one will disagree with that.

If there is one Malaysian Chinese leader who could strengthen Sino-Malay relations, it would be Dr Ling. His background, temperament and attitude are conducive to breaking down the racial barrier.

Dr Ling's strongest point is that he is a balanced person. The lack of political realism on the part of his opponents is obvious. Their infighting, then and now, and even more so in the future, is bound to discredit them.

I was made aware of the accusations against Dr Ling; they have not as yet, I believe, been carried to extremes but I would not, if I were Dr Ling, worry too much as people can read that the accusations are taken out of the proper context.

The original political alliance between Umno and MCA began in the 1952 municipal election and it was only meant as an ad-hoc arrangement at local level. The results astonished even the cynics and sceptics. It hardened into a continuous working partnership which precipitated in an early first general elections in July 1955 and independence on August 31, two years later.

Tun Razak, Dr Mahathir, Tun Tan Siew Sin and Dr Ling are among the national leaders who have always put sectarian or, if you like, communal interests, aside and concentrated consciously on national programmes and plans. I dare say we have reached a stage, where we not only should, but can, put down narrow interests, to live and work together for the benefit

of all.

As the Tunku was fond of telling Malaysians, unity must arise from the national desire of the people themselves. Unity cannot be achieved if the leaders sit comfortably at the high table and look down upon the people.

Dr Mahathir, I gather, has told his staff and those responsible for organising his programmes that he should not be isolated from the people when he visits state capitals, districts and kampungs. He wants to meet, talk, sit and eat with the people - not with the dignitaries. Perhaps, only the chief host of the function should be with him. He does not want the VIPs to fence him off from the rakyat.

I am now absolutely and firmly convinced that this is Dr Mahathir's wish and what he wants. I hope this process of "mendekati pemimpin dengan rakyat" -no more separating the leaders (on a pedestal or stage) from the rakyat (on the floor) is pursued immediately. Let us wait and see whether Dr Mahathir's preference will become a directive and what he wants is complied with.

Dr Ling has a good brain, one of the most capable MCA leaders. I need not remind constituent parties of the Barisan Nasional, but for those (I think there are not a few) who have forgotten Malaysian history, I would like to recall what General Sir Gerald Templer, the British Supremo who ruled Malaya with absolute power in the early 1950s, had to say about "the realism of Malayan politics". "H.S. Lee, the most capable MCA leader, was also persuaded to accept, though he discussed the proposition (Templer's offer to him to join his Cabinet) with the Umno leaders (Tunku and Tun Razak) before he did so". Lee later became Tun Hau-Shek Lee, our first Minister of Finance.

I believe, then as now, that a close relationship between these two communities is imperative if we want to live happily, peacefully and in prosperity. Of course, the roles of the other communities - Indians, Sikhs, Sri Lankans - are also important and they must not and have not been excluded.

Templer said that 49 years ago and I am very glad every sane Malaysian then and now seems inclined to agree. And, perhaps, in time we can go a step further in our march towards a united Bangsa Malaysia. Dr Ling's moderate leadership and understanding of political realism are crucial - not like that of a few self-seekers of power, position and pelf or spoils.

Dr Ling is one of the four MCA presidents out of eight who have held Cabinet posts - Siew Sin, Tan Sri Lee San Choon and Dr Neoh Yee Pan (Yee Pan and Siew Sin were already ministers before becoming MCA presidents) - and he is perhaps one of the greater MCA leaders.

Forty-nine years ago and for the following two decades, MCA was largely the party of the rich towkays. Now, most of its membership, I believe, transcends class and it is this that makes MCA unique among the Chinese-based political parties. This will be, in part, Dr Ling's legacy.

Dr Ling, for now, has no direct competitor, though there is plenty of competition in one way or another within his party. The MCA would be a great political party if it were not so much its own worst enemy.

By now, this GP who played rugby and sang in school and the University of Malaya (then in Singapore) could have measured the best years of his life practising medicine, making a lot of money and living happily. Instead, he entered Parliament in 1974 and has been catapulted into the spotlight as Malaysia's most powerful Chinese politician.

People say Dr Ling, like Dr Mahathir, has a face that is difficult to read. Whatever, I do not believe the beacon is in danger of being extinguished anytime soon. After all, Dr Ling has proved he is a leader with a difference; some difference.

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