

08/06/2000

Ling's decision expected but he has to address internal issues

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DATUK Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik's announcement yesterday that he would continue to soldier on as Transport Minister did not come as a surprise.

Reporters converging at the MCA headquarters for a press conference called by him came prepared. Some had even finished their stories before making their way to Wisma MCA.

But as the dust settles and his position consolidated, the huge responsibility confronting the MCA president now is ensuring that party leaders remain united and close ranks.

As summed up by one party member: "To outsiders, MCA looks fine with its members solidly behind the president.

"But they have no idea of the undercurrent and dissatisfaction that erupted from this episode. To say that MCA is sound and stable is a fallacy."

He said Dr Ling might have emerged victorious this time but the dispute between him and deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek could crop up again.

"Ah Lek and company are now on the defensive but if their grouses are not addressed, Dr Ling might have to face them again later."

Dr Ling's initial decision to resign after all, was attributed to differences in opinion within the party on appointments to government posts, and political observers pointed out that the whole episode had ruffled some feathers.

Just because almost all party leaders showered praise on his decision to remain in the Cabinet, it is naive to assume that a silent minority feeling out-manoeuvred does not exist in the party.

The Chinese culture and party tradition simply does not permit such a frank, public outburst - especially after the party president had offered to sacrifice his powerful ministerial post.

With the party elections due in 2002, Dr Ling does not have much time to address the party's internal problem before a crisis shatters Barisan Nasional's senior partner.

To better gauge the sentiments at the grassroots, it is best for him to go to the ground and talk to ordinary members instead of just getting feedback from his appointees in the party's presidential council.

A senior MCA official also said that the central committee should meet more regularly - if possible on a weekly basis like the presidential council - to enable grassroot sentiments to be conveyed more effectively to party leaders.

On the overwhelming expression of support for Dr Ling to stay on, his detractors argued that it did not truly represent grassroot sentiments.

"How many of the 155 divisions had actually met and passed a resolution urging the president to reconsider his decision?" asked one.

He said the expression of support was a clever move, engineered to "force" Dr Ling to reconsider his decision, banking on the ground that it would be "disrespectful" if he pays no heed to the calls.

But Dr Ling's supporters said one should not doubt that the support was genuine.

They said the prospect of the Chinese losing a senior leader close to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would be too much for the community to stomach.

It was under Dr Ling's leadership that MCA had truly emerged as the senior partner in BN. They argued that the Chinese were not prepared to

see the close link nurtured by Dr Ling with Umno and the Government be severed.

There is also no guarantee that the new person taking over will be able to carry on with the good ties, thus making the party president indispensable to the Chinese community at the moment.

An MCA Member of Parliament echoed the sentiments that things were not as rosy as they were made out to be.

He agreed that Dr Ling had played his cards well in silencing voices of discontent within the party, showing the astute politician he is.

If the problem cannot be addressed internally - Dr Ling is said to have a hard time convincing his opponents in the party's central committee meetings - what better way is there than taking it into the open.

The answer is to get public support, which he managed to secure overwhelmingly.

In the end, not only did he consolidate his position and his allies but also to checkmate his opponents, squeezing them into a corner and effectively putting any challenge to his leadership to an end, albeit temporarily.

When he announced his intention to relinquish his ministerial post on May 22, one could sense that Dr Ling was determined to see it through.

The passing of a resolution by the presidential council rejecting his plans to resign failed to make him change his mind.

It was only after a meeting with party leaders from all over the country that he relented, saying the views of all parties would be considered.

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