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## Ling spins a mystery

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THE political whirlwind set off by Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik's resignation on Monday was still spinning even as the week drew to a close.

His aides have more or less given up counting the barrage of telephone calls or even the delegations which have swamped the Transport Ministry, beseeching the MCA president not to resign his ministerial post.

"So many of them coming and going. How to count?" one of the aides said, shaking his head.

Those who know the burly 56-year-old politician well have gone directly to his house in Damansara Heights where the lights have been burning till the wee hours of the morning.

And, of course, his quit attempt has hogged the headlines almost daily since.

The last week has also seen protocol fly out of the seventh window of Dr Ling's Ministry office as some of these groups arrived at the ministry without appointments and insisted on seeing their president.

Even the blue-shirted security officer, who had attempted to stamp some semblance of order among journalists camped out along the narrow corridor leading to the Minister's room, gave up by mid-week and could be seen slumped at his security post wearing a resigned look.

MCA leaders have been staggered by the scale of the reaction and the emotions involved.

"You'd never expect anything like this ... I don't think the president expected it either," said a senior MCA figure.

The flurry of activity, and the zeal and urgency with which convoys of party faithful as well as journalists crisscrossed the city between the MCA headquarters in downtown KL and the Transport Ministry on the capital's outskirts have to be seen to be believed.

For instance, several journalists from NST and Berita Harian went in one car to cover the meeting of MCA assemblymen and MPs at Wisma MCA on Tuesday.

The journalists were there barely 20 minutes before they found themselves hopping back into their car to follow the convoy of vehicles bearing the 100-odd wakil rakyat delegation headed for the Ministry.

The MPs and assemblymen had called short their meeting at the headquarters after one of them pointed out that instead of "wasting time here saying why we want Dr Ling to stay, we might as well go and tell him at his office now".

They had made no appointment but as one of them recalled, the group decided they would barge in, and stay put in his office till he gave them an explanation.

There was also an added urgency to the wakil rakyat mission that Tuesday afternoon.

They were very afraid that at the Cabinet meeting the following day, the Prime Minister would accept Dr Ling's resignation and thus, end their endeavour to change their president's mind.

The look on Penang MCA chairman Dr Sak Cheng Lum's face as he emerged from the wakil rakyat meeting said it all.

The normally amiable Dr Sak, university mate and long-time party confidant to Dr Ling, was all tensed up and his face was quite gaunt.

"We may be running out of time," were the few terse words he allowed himself that afternoon.

The Wanita MCA went a step further when it came to their turn on Wednesday.

Wanita chief Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen arrived home from Taiwan in the early hours of Wednesday.

It is doubtful she had a shut-eye of more than a couple of hours as she caught up with the latest developments, drew up Press statements and prepared to chair an emergency Wanita central committee meeting at the headquarters.

The Wanita delegation didn't spend much time at the headquarters either. After barely an hour, the group of more than 20 women left Wisma MCA in a van and four cars - and with a large bouquet of 18 red roses.

"One-eight is yat-putt ... sounds like yat-fatt. Means success, you know!" one of them said.

Their first stop: Dr Ling's residence.

Their aim: to ask Datin Ena Ling to intercede with her husband.

The stylish Ena was gracious but she is an experienced political wife and her answer was polished to a fault - she thanked them, told them her husband was firm in his decision but that she would convey their message to him.

Their next stop was, of course, Dr Ling's office and there, the dam finally burst. Tears flowed for a number of them as they appealed to their president to stay on.

Said one of the women: "You have to remember, Wanita gained under his leadership. He really pushed for a bigger role for us ... 30 per cent representation in the party.

"For the first time, MCA has three Wanita members in the central committee. It was at the expense of the men ... he dared defy them."

As far as many of the Wanita people are concerned, he is one of MCA's most progressive presidents.

And how has Dr Ling weathered the storm of activity he set of? The former medical officer is notorious for his superb emotional control.

One Wanita figure noted that Dr Ling sat through their meeting with a "poker-face".

"He was stoic. At most, he nodded his head but he must have been moved," said another MCA politician.

There is no doubt that the bulk of these delegations who beat a path to their president's office are genuinely concerned and sincere about Dr Ling staying on.

For instance, Loh Yoon Foo, the Titi Tinggi assemblyman who had threatened to resign for not getting an exco post in Perlis after the general election, told Dr Ling: "You asked me to stay when I wanted to leave. If you can persuade me to stay back, I hope I can now persuade you to do the same."

Although no one in the party is prepared yet to admit they are staring a political crisis in the face, the seriousness of the situation and its implications are beginning to sink in.

One of those implications has to do with hierarchy, prestige and influence in the ruling coalition.

The mainstream Chinese community puts much measure on the fact that Dr Ling, as both president and Minister, is ranked third in the coalition after the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister in the Barisan Nasional.

Said a Chinese businessman from Penang: "The seating arrangement in Parliament is very important to the Chinese. The symbolism is that he has the ear of the PM ... how to whisper in his ear if you sit four rows behind PM?"

Many party people are also worried about Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir

Mohamad's remark about having an experienced person as Transport Minister.

Their interpretation of the comment: Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Chan Kong Choy, whom Dr Ling had pin-pointed for the post, is not considered seasoned enough.

In that case, some of them fret, the MCA may even lose the Transport Ministry for something less prestigious.

To the credit of the party rank-and-file, there have been no attacks - yet - against Chan and his mentor and deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek.

The two are deemed as central to the past few months of party arguments over not gaining more government posts after the general election.

Both men are more or less politically marooned and whatever they may say or do from now, they will continue to look bad.

They were among those who tried hardest to persuade Dr Ling to change his mind.

To be fair to Chan, he has been a loyal and obedient party subordinate to Dr Ling, acquiescing to the latter to the extent of staying put as Youth leader even after he was ready for the vice-president stage.

Strategically speaking, Dr Ling, who is well-versed in the political philosophy underlying Sun Tzu's Art of War, has gained two steps ahead by taking one step backwards.

From being perceived as being unable to exercise his clout as leader of the secondmost important party in the BN, he has now gained ground as a popular figure whom the party rank-and-file are clearly not prepared to let go of.

Chan, on the other hand, has no option but to decline the Ministerial post - someone likened it to a "poisoned chalice" - offered by Dr Ling.

But as the dust begins to settle over Dr Ling's stunning move, questions are being asked whether his resignation is a result of internal party problems or connected to the business affairs of his son, Hee Leong.

The ambiguity has to do with varying versions of why Dr Ling stepped aside.

When he announced his resignation at Monday's presidential council meeting, he implied it had to do with criticism over his inability to secure more government posts for the party.

Indeed, there had been attempts to resolve the impasse between Dr Ling and his party deputy following the controversial CC meeting a month ago.

Several behind-the-scene meetings took place between the two sides and during the period, Dr Ling increasingly told those close to him that it was "time to go".

His inner circle probably got wind of his quit move the night before the announcement. He told five of them gathered at his house that evening he had informed the Prime Minister and that Dr Mahathir had asked him to think it over.

But events and statements made since seem to suggest that Dr Ling may also have been concerned about rumours surrounding his son's business affairs.

"Basically, the picture of why he resigned is less clear than ever. There seems to be two conflicting accounts," said a CC member.

The reason why some are anxious to distinguish which is the more accurate account has to do with gauging whether or not Dr Ling will change his mind on returning from his fortnight of leave.

"If the reason is party problems, there is a greater likelihood of him retracting his resignation because it's clear he is still wanted," said the same CC member.

Others say Dr Ling is unlikely to change his mind and the two weeks' leave is just Dr Mahathir's way of deferring this sensitive decision in the light of the coming Teluk Kemang by-election.

"He's been under tremendous pressure. I can sense it when I talk to him. He really wanted to go but I didn't think he would do it," said an inner circle member.

But said an MCA figure from Terengganu where Dr Ling officiated at the State covention: "Things will be clearer in two weeks' time and a lot will depend on how the grassroots react. If they want Dr Ling to stay, their voice cannot be ignored."