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Mahathir to reshuffle Cabinet if Dr Ling resigns

Lokman Mansor; Kamarul Yunus

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he will reshuffle the Cabinet if Transport Minister Datuk Dr Ling Liong Sik resigns.

Dr Mahathir said the post of transport minister requires an experienced minister and a reshuffle will probably involve other ministries as well.

"It is an important post. We have big plans for the transportation industry. We cannot just replace (Dr Ling) like that. We will need to make some adjustments. Maybe those with more experience will take the post and someone new can take another less responsible post," Dr Mahathir said.

He said this when asked at a press conference after opening the Third Asia-Africa Forum (AAF III) in Sungai Besi yesterday, whether there will be a Cabinet reshuffle soon.

Asked if he is accepting Dr Ling's resignation, Dr Mahathir said he has not officially received Dr Ling's resignation letter. He said Dr Ling is still the Transport Minister and can attend the Cabinet meeting today.

"If possible I would try to persuade him to stay on because he is a very experienced man, with 14 years in the Cabinet. He has done a good work, especially in promoting our ports and shipping in this country. It is a loss to have a man with such an experience and skill leaving the Government," the Prime Minister said.

Asked further, Dr Mahathir said the Transport Minister's post need not necessarily go to someone from the MCA.

It was reported that Dr Ling plans to recommend MCA vice-president Datuk Chan Kong Choy as his replacement. It was also reported that Dr Ling's resignation had something to do with the MCA's failure to secure more Cabinet posts despite its strong showing in the recent general elections.

Excluding Dr Ling, the MCA now has 11 representatives in the Government - three ministers, six deputy ministers and two parliamentary secretaries.

"As far as the numbers are concerned, we have given due consideration to the MCA. I don't think we can just increase the numbers like that without upsetting other parties as well," Dr Mahathir said.

He said while the MCA had performed very well in the general elections, that should not be the only basis for deciding representation in the Government.

"Today one does well, the next day one does not do so well. As you can see, when the MCA did not do so well, we did not reduce its representation in the Government. It is very bad to try and respond to a certain situation without reading the future or the past," Dr Mahathir said.

Asked to comment on suggestions that Dr Ling's resignation is part of a strategy to resolve his problems with MCA deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek, Dr Mahathir said he would not want to speculate on that.

MCA observers claim that Dr Ling had been under fire within the party in recent months over several issues, including the allocation of Cabinet posts to MCA representatives, MCA's representation in Gerakan-led Penang, and other party problems.

It was reported that there were now two camps in the MCA, those with Dr Ling and those supporting his deputy Lim. A contest for the party presidency was expected at the next party elections in 2002.

One observer even speculated that Dr Ling's "resignation" could actually be a political ploy to divert the antagonism directed at him, and that he had no plans to resign anytime soon.

Meanwhile, Dr Ling told newsmen that he stands firm with his decision to

resign from the Cabinet but did not indicate whether he would do so after meeting with the Prime Minister today.

"There has been no change in my decision," Dr Ling said when asked whether he would take into consideration the plea from several MCA leaders to stay on as Transport Minister.

Several MCA leaders, including the majority of the party's members of Parliament (MPs) and State Assemblymen visited him to show their support and want him to withdraw his resignation letter.

"I will take note of all their sentiments and let you know my decision after meeting with the Prime Minister," he told newsmen after receiving the MCA MPs and State Assemblymen, led by Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Ong Ka Ting at his office in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Dr Ling said some of the leaders have suggested that he takes time off before deciding whether to resign or reconsider to stay as a minister.

"It (my decision) could be in a month or so...I will also take note of what the Prime Minister will say to me tomorrow before making any decision," he said, adding he will attend the Cabinet meeting today.

Prior to the meeting, Ong, who is also MCA vice-president said the MPs and State Assemblymen had convened a special meeting among themselves at the MCA head office and decided to reject Dr Ling's resignation.

One of the MPs, who declined to be named, said their meeting with Dr Ling later in the afternoon was the last attempt by MCA leaders to coax the latter to withdraw his intention to resign from the Cabinet.

"We are running out of time. We have to persuade him (Dr Ling) before he meets the Prime Minister," he said.

Bername reports: Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said his decision to leave the Cabinet will give others a chance to fill the vacancy created by his resignation.

"It will give another person a chance to replace me," he told reporters attending a dinner in conjunction with the 107th anniversary of the Selangor and Federal Territory Restaurant Operators Association in Kuala Lumpur last night.

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