

25/05/2000

MCA's yen for more seats behind Ling's retirement?

Shamsul Akmar

AT FIRST it was quite amusing when a newspaper editor described Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik's resignation as very economic in nature.

"If it is true that Dr Ling came to the decision because some quarters in the MCA feel he was incompetent for not having secured more executive posts for the party, then Dr Ling is definitely dealing with true-blue capitalists.

"Their argument is that the MCA deserves more Cabinet posts because they performed well in the last general elections. What about when they did badly in the past, or if they were to do badly in the future? Did they, or will they, relinquish a post or two?"

This, the editor says, is very much like when the yen appreciates.

"Prices of products which are Japanese-related go up but when the yen depreciates, the prices do not come down."

With the explanation, the analogy was not funny anymore as the reality of political bargaining, especially within the Barisan Nasional (BN), came to the fore.

As much as the real reason for Dr Ling's resignation is unclear, the fact that the bargaining for more seats is being cited as one reflects the sensitivity of race-relations in the nation.

This is the reality when a political party designs its struggles along racial lines and, at the same time, has to accept the reality of the nation's political climate of needing to cooperate with other racially-based parties to survive.

It is a fact that none of these political parties will be able to survive on their own and rule the country effectively. In short, none can exist in isolation.

Back to the MCA front, the demand for more executive posts in the Government following its creditable performance in the last general elections.

Apart from more Cabinet posts, the party has also demanded the right to the Penang chief ministership following the crossover of two Gerakan assemblymen, making the MCA the leading party in the state.

These demands were debated but nothing came of it, not that the political pundits expected Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to wilt under such pressure.

However, such a situation is not uncommon in BN. Political bargaining, compromise and accommodation are part and parcel of the whole concept and existence of the coalition.

In fact, if one were to trace the history of the coalition, the seeds were sown when Umno and the MCA had their first formal alliance in the Kuala Lumpur Municipal Council elections in 1952.

This alliance has proven a potent force and has continuously won the nation's elections without fail.

But from the very beginning, the partnership between Umno and the MCA has been caught up with two considerations - to win elections and to vigorously champion the interest of the race they represent.

On this score, it is quite amazing how the coalition has managed to survive the ups and downs of racial politics since independence.

Of course, one cannot ignore the 1969 racial riots which saw the whole concept of racial relations tested to the hilt.

Luckily for the country, the riots turned out to be a blessing in

disguise as the political leaders in the country went on to forge BN as the greater alliance and formulate policies which they felt would reduce racial strains.

In 1987, racial tension rose to another feverish pitch and was stopped by pre-emptive Internal Security Act arrests.

At that time, it was widely perceived that certain political parties had joined Chinese civic and educational groups to put pressure on Umno over the Chinese schools issue.

To the Malays then, the Chinese had decided to gang up to challenge the status quo.

The harder the push, the more the Malays, especially those in Umno, felt cornered and the ultra-Malays within the party emerged.

Of course to equate the present situation with the 1987 circumstances is far-fetched but to ignore the need for observing the elite accommodation process within the BN will be foolhardy.

This is especially true as Umno got bruised in the last general elections. Its members will feel uncomfortable with the new demands. They will equate the MCA's moves as menanggung di air keruh (taking advantage of someone in trouble).

As such, it would be truly sad if Dr Ling were resigning because of the Penang chief ministership and Cabinet posts.

It would then mean that those who had pressured him had forgotten the principles behind the bonding of BN.

The coalition has worked because the citizenry, by and large, have accepted it as the most workable political solution in the country.

The BN must accept the fact that it has not been able to inspire ideological exuberance. It is accepted for its pragmatic approach which includes the ability of the component party leaders to convince their members that the deal they have worked out is the best under the circumstances.

Breaking away from this tradition will not augur well for any quarters in the BN.

If the MCA's rank and file can accept the reality of the BN's concept of power-sharing and allow the issue of Cabinet posts and Penang chief ministership rest, it would help the coalition move back onto the right track.

The MCA and Gerakan must not forget that after the 1995 general elections, when Umno became the leading party in Penang, efforts by some Penang Umno leaders to get the chief ministership were shot down by the party's top leadership.

In Sabah now, with Umno having won most of the seats in the last state elections, efforts to put a stop to the rotation of the chief minister's post are in full swing.

Unless all the component party leaders in the Sabah BN agree to the scrapping of the rotation, it is unlikely that Dr Mahathir, or any other top Umno leader, will agree to this.

After all, that was the reason BN won the state. Unless, of course, some quarters want to go into the details of how many votes were secured by Umno supporters as compared with those by the other components.

Similar exercises can also be undertaken in the peninsula - on how many of the votes that the MCA gave an assurance on were delivered to Umno candidates and vice-versa.

It can be a good academic exercise but such one upmanship will be cyclical and by the next elections, the equation will have changed.

This, BN advocates should take note of. Unless, of course, they truly want to be like the true-blue capitalists who only believe in maximum profit from minimal investment.

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