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Not easy for Ling to extricate himself from quagmire he created

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TRANSPORT Minister and MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik's announcement last Monday to resign his Cabinet post has left more questions than answers.

His decision to take two weeks' leave "to think things over" after his seemingly firm statement that he wanted to relinquish the post will fuel speculation as to the true reason for his action.

Seasoned MCA watchers said it was the "suddenness" of his decision, the reason and the timing of the announcement that have become a hot topic of conversation.

An insider said the party was scheduled to have its Central Committee meeting on Saturday.

Last Monday's meeting was convened in a hurry. Members were told by telephone to attend a meeting to discuss matters pertaining to accounts. They were not told that it was an emergency meeting.

It thus took members of the party's Presidential Council and the Central Committee by complete surprise when Dr Ling informed the meeting that now was the right time for him to retire after having served as a Cabinet Minister for a long time.

Ostensibly, Dr Ling's quit decision is linked to the so-called party squabble arising from a promise made by Dr Ling in 1998 to deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek that Deputy Minister Datuk Chan Kong Choy would be recommended for the first available Cabinet post.

It would also appear that the MCA's perceived dissatisfaction over inadequate Cabinet representation is also part of the reason.

Dr Ling has been quoted as having told the party that his leaving the government post would resolve the party squabble over the lack of one Cabinet seat.

But as a veteran MCA watcher pointed out, if one bothers to examine the reason given by Dr Ling for his action and the circumstances of the situation, the two do not quite gel.

Party-wise, MCA's position is not at stake. Things are going well for the party. Dr Ling is the longest serving president of the party and his position is well entrenched. There is no indication whatsoever that he cannot handle any of the party's problems that have surfaced.

Criticisms that have been levelled at him of late, notably that he did not fulfil his promise to his deputy, are quite normal in any party, said a grass roots leader.

"As party chief, he has to make certain decisions, popular or otherwise. But given time and explanations, no party problem is insurmountable."

In fact, Dr Ling has been reported several times as having said that the party problems could be resolved internally without fuss.

Indeed, Dr Ling, credited for having brought stability to the MCA, has shown his astuteness in his long tenure in tackling thorny party issues, including warding off a major challenge by his deputy Datuk Lee Kim Sai to wrest control of the leadership in 1990.

Thus, the Ling-Lim tiff is seen as a storm in a tea-cup and unlikely to rock the MCA boat.

Dr Ling himself strove to play down the rift with his deputy as seen by their handshake with broad smiles in a show of camaraderie in the recent Selangor MCA convention which was prominently reported by the Chinese papers.

Last week, Dr Ling said he and Lim are good friends and the occasional tension between leaders in a party is not abnormal.

These events serve to give credence to the speculation that the party squabble is not the cause of his decision to resign his government post.

Dr Ling, in fact, put paid to more debate on the issue of non-promotion of Chan at the party's Presidential Council some three weeks ago.

In response to Lim's accusation that he broke the pledge made to him, Dr Ling said he could not fulfil the promise as he was unable to do so in view of the change in the placing of Chan in the vice-presidency line-up following last year's party election.

He asserted that he could not possibly allow Chan to take precedence over Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting who enjoys third placing.

An MCA veteran leader, conversant with the party constitution, hastened to point out that while Dr Ling's response to Lim appeared reasonable, he could still fulfil his promise to Lim if he had wanted to by allowing Chan to replace Lim as deputy president through a Central Committee election.

Lim, former Human Resources Minister, who is anxious to retain the slot for Pahang on his retirement, would easily make way for Chan after the party polls.

Likewise, Ong could have been appointed secretary-general of the party.

Both Chan and Ong would be recommended for ministerial posts by party tradition.

If Dr Ling had chosen this way out, he would have resolved the matter seamlessly as he could then fulfil the pact he made with Lim and at the same time promote Ong, who is viewed as his protege.

The party chief must have his own reason for not taking that line of action, said a keen party observer. "It is too bad that Chan is not promoted. It appears that both he and Lim have to live with it for they are not in a position of strength in the party."

Summed up the observer: "Given Ling's unassailable position in the party and that party election is only due in another two years, his announcement to give up his Cabinet post to resolve the party squabble is unconvincing.

"Moreover, in offering the government post to Chan, he knows or ought to know that such an offer can never be accepted by Chan or anyone else at the expense of the president having to sacrifice himself."

Chan himself has termed it a preposterous proposition, saying that he was "shocked to hear of Ling's resignation and his name mentioned as successor".

As for the so-called MCA clamour for more Cabinet posts, party leaders view it as a non-issue for Dr Ling himself was quoted as having said last December soon after the general election that the party would not seek more Government posts. It was quite happy with the status quo.

Last week, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, when responding to a question as to whether Dr Ling's resignation was linked to the party not being given additional positions in the Government, he said the MCA did not make such a demand in the first place.

It is increasingly clear that whatever the outcome of Dr Ling's decision after his fortnight's leave, he would be in a quandary.

He has become the target of rife speculation judging by the many pages devoted to his news in the vernacular papers.

The situation is viewed as being aggravated by his many statements after his quit announcement.

His declaration that he would serve the full term as president until 2002 is seen as complicating the situation for the party should he decide to relinquish his Cabinet post.

Although there had been occasions in the past when the party chief was not in the Cabinet, they were not holding the post because of special

reasons.

Dr Ling's persistent repudiation of the rumours linking his intended resignation with his son, Hee Leong's alleged business problems, is unlikely to quell speculation given the close relationship between him (Dr Ling) and fugitive businessman Datuk Soh Chee Wen before their fall-out in 1998.

Soh is on the Securities Commission's wanted list for allegedly defrauding Omega Securities Sdn Bhd. He is still at large and speculation is rife about his return and arrest.

The close relationship between Dr Ling and Soh and the latter's business connections with the party leader's eldest son is open knowledge, especially to the MCA rank-and-file.

According to insiders, at the height of their relationship, party members raised eyebrows seeing the meteoric rise of Soh in the party hierarchy as he was given key posts in the Presidential Council and the Central Committee.

They were just as amazed over the sudden fall-out of the two.

Many a Chinese leader and MCA watcher feel that should Dr Ling decide to continue as Minister, it would not be credible for him to use the appeal from the party and others for him to stay as grounds for making a U-turn.

This is because in Chinese culture, such an appeal is often a face-giving perfunctory courtesy gesture to give a gracious exit for a leader who has offered to step down.

Backtracking after dropping a bombshell from a position of strength with no sign of any threat on the horizon certainly demands a more convincing reason to counter irresistible public perception that there is more to it than meets the eye.

On the other hand, if Dr Ling chooses to leave without further explanation, there is bound to be even more speculation as to the real reason for taking such a drastic action.

At the end of the day, whichever way he decides, it would not be easy for him to get out of the quagmire he has created for himself without controversy.

Meanwhile, MCA supporters and the Chinese community are keenly awaiting events to unfold and the mystery to unravel itself.

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