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Remote possibility Ling may reconsider based on grassroots' reaction

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WILL he or won't he?

Yesterday marked the first step in what could be a long drawn-out drama to determine whether MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik will stick to his decision to quit his Cabinet post.

The mood changed literally by the hour, as delegations of MCA leaders made a frantic dash in what was seen as "last minute efforts" to persuade Dr Ling to change his mind.

The day's proceedings began at 11am with party deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek leading a delegation of the party's four vice-presidents to meet the Prime Minister in Putrajaya asking Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad not to accept Dr Ling's resignation.

This led some observers to point out that despite the reportedly "sour" relations between Dr Ling and his party deputy, unity was still the main agenda.

Thus, there was still the possibility of Dr Ling changing his mind.

Apparently not, because by 3.30pm, things began to look desperate.

A massive delegation comprising MCA State Assemblymen and Members of Parliament met at MCA headquarters over the issue.

After the half-hour discussion, vice-president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting told reporters that they had reached a unanimous decision to immediately meet Dr Ling and ask him to change his mind.

A State Assemblyman present at the meeting explained the urgency: "We feel that we are racing against time because the Cabinet meets tomorrow. What if he insists on resigning?"

The lift doors literally closed behind him as he finished the sentence, as the entourage of over 40 anxious MPs and Assemblymen made a frantic dash to Dr Ling's office at the Ministry of Transport.

The mood in Dr Ling's office was equally depressing. To the casual observer, the scene was reminiscent of a bereaved family gathered to mourn the impending death of a beloved father.

And as most soap operas of such genre are wont to depict, scenes of the deceased's sons fighting bitterly over the inheritance is the usual aftermath.

As such, it was interesting to note that the conversation which took place among those waiting for the meeting to end was about possible candidates to replace Dr Ling if he stuck to his quit decision.

Although the post of Transport Minister is traditionally held by the party chief, Dr Ling was quoted on Monday as saying that he would recommend to the Prime Minister that MCA vice-president Datuk Chan Kong Choy replace him in the Cabinet.

Chan, who is currently Deputy Finance Minister, is the only vice-president who does not hold a full Cabinet position.

From the perspective of party hierarchy, Chan's candidacy for Transport Minister is understandable.

However, everyone knows the Prime Minister has the final say on Cabinet appointments and it is interesting to note the PM's immediate reaction to the idea.

Dr Mahathir said that although filling the vacancy was a priority, and that the quota would remain for MCA, some adjustments would have to be made, namely to ensure that the prestigious portfolio is taken up by a senior person.

But apart from Chan, there are two other potential candidates higher up in the party hierarchy and with experience as well.

One of them is deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek who, however, had opted to step back from elective politics in the last general election. The other is secretary-general Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh who was dropped from the Cabinet.

Would either of the two replace Dr Ling at the Transport Ministry?

A central committee member said that most people's minds were on the resignation issue and with things in such a flux at the moment, they did not have time yet to think seriously about filling the post.

"It's very hard to say who the possible candidates are at this point in time," he said. "People's minds are just not on the subject at the moment."

Meanwhile, emerging from the hour-long meeting with Dr Ling at his office late in the afternoon, Ong, looking serious, only said: "We have done our best ... It's up to him (Dr Ling) now."

Minutes later, Dr Ling called reporters into his office where there was a marked change in mood.

While maintaining that there had been "no change" regarding his decision to quit, Dr Ling said he agreed "to take note" of all the outpouring of support he had received since yesterday from party leaders.

As the media rushed back to their offices to file their stories, the earlier comments of a central committee member offered food for thought.

He had confided that "there is a remote possibility that the president may reconsider his decision based on the grassroots' reaction".

"After all, you must know that Dr Ling is the master strategist," he said.

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