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Thorny leadership transition issue

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"BETTER not to talk ... no gag order, but better not to talk," said an MCA minister when asked about the stormy waters that this second-ranking partner of the Barisan Nasional seems to have sailed into last week.

He was to repeat his "better not to talk" phrase about eight more times before signing off - and rather sheepishly too - on his handphone.

Reluctant as MCA figures may be to speak, the heated exchange of words between MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and his deputy Datuk Lim Ah Lek at the recent party central committee meeting brought to the surface a host of grievances that have been simmering since the general election.

The intensity of the incident stunned the over 30 people at the meeting. As one of them puts it, "there has never been that kind of atmosphere before".

It also seems to have left them largely unsure about how to deal with the situation although several have tried to brush it off as a "non-incident" or even as "normal in a party as big as MCA".

An MCA MP insisted the media was trying to "make a mountain out of a molehill" but begged not to be quoted, adding: "I pray I will be left out of all this."

Others tried to downplay the incident in classic Malaysian English as "two brothers fighting also you want to report".

Incidentally, the Nanyang Siang Pau journalist who had scooped the other papers with his front-page report of the stormy meeting was at Parliament on Thursday, but could not get a single MCA MP to go on record on the issue.

The CC meeting proceeded normally until lawyer Datuk Wong Mook Leong, one of MCA's most respected and senior figures, questioned Dr Ling about the allocation of government posts in the party.

Midway through Dr Ling's explanation, Lim suddenly turned red in the face, lost his legendary cool, and accused the president of obfuscating the issue and going back on a gentleman's agreement about who would get which post. An acrimonious argument erupted, voices were raised and strong words uttered.

"It happened just like that, pom! And it was over in a few minutes," said one of those present.

Dr Ling is a difficult man to provoke and his ability to rein in his temper probably saved the situation from deteriorating.

And although the meeting ended in a calm albeit tense mood, the flare-up basically signalled the end of the unspoken moratorium on grievances among the rank-and-file over a host of issues.

Party people are at pains to stress that this does not amount to a crisis, nor even a fissure. But the leadership, they said, would have to acknowledge and deal with the grouches in order to prevent a split.

The problem goes back to the general election; the solid Chinese support for the BN inevitably raised expectations among the MCA grassroots for a more significant role for the party in the new Government.

But disappointment set in when the party president said the MCA would settle for the status quo in terms of posts - and this in the face of Gerakan getting an additional parliamentary secretary post.

Said a CC member: "It is like a businessman standing in front of his shop saying, 'I don't need any more customers' ... that's how we see it."

Many MCA leaders were put in a spot and had a hard time rationalising the situation to their supporters. To compound matters, Gerakan was also given an exco seat in Negri Sembilan as well as the local government Exco post in Selangor which had traditionally gone to the MCA.

In that sense, the party's highly-publicised stand-off with Gerakan in Penang over the Chief Minister's post - futile as it may have been from the very start - was a crucial and strategic move to show the grassroots that the party did try.

"I can vouch for how hard the president tried in the case of Penang, how he spoke on a one-to-one basis with the PM and DPM. He left no stone unturned," says Penang MCA chairman Datuk Dr Sak Cheng Lum.

Dr Ling has not been unaware of the ground sentiments and had even despatched MCA publicity bureau head Datuk Wong See Wah to go round and explain.

He also told those close to him that he did not wish to pressure the Prime Minister for more posts and that Umno should be allowed to settle its problems.

Others explain the situation as too many capable people and too few posts.

"In that case, he should have consulted the party before deciding not to ask for more posts," said another CC member.

Therein lies another grouse: that the president prefers to consult his presidential council, and more so his inner circle, than the CC, the highest decision-making body.

Given the intensity of the flare-up, it is clear that the Ling-Lim tension had been building up even before the general election and its roots lie in what some in the party call the "succession question".

It is out in the open now that Dr Ling's choice as the next No 2 is vice-president Datuk Ong Ka Ting (the Local Government and Housing Minister) whom he has been grooming by way of delegating more duties and clout over the years.

Says a Selangor MCA politician: "It's common knowledge that people go to Ka Ting when they can't get to the president and his word (Ka Ting's) is like final. It's been happening over a long time and he has become quite powerful."

Ong, who started off as Dr Ling's political secretary in the 1980s, has also been building up his powerbase in Perak and Johor, MCA's two strongest States. Perak is held by his brother Ka Chuan (a State Exco member) whereas Ong virtually runs things in Johor for State chairman Dr Ling.

All this is not to deny that Ong is one of the most promising politician-technocrats to emerge in recent years - he is bright, diligent, approachable and smart.

The trouble is that the other VP, Datuk Chan Kong Choy, a long-time protege of Lim, is just as intelligent, competent, popular and ambitious.

Chan, considered more senior than Ong, is thought to have been boxed in when Ong was allowed to contest the VP post a full term before Chan was allowed to move from his Youth leader post to the VP stage.

And when he did so last year, he was deeply disappointed to trail in last among the four VPs.

His mentor, Lim, was reportedly upset when Chan was not made a Minister and although appointed to the prestigious Deputy Finance Minister post, it was seen as yet another attempt to thwart his progress.

The Pahang-based Lim, like Dr Ling, has his favourites. In fact, his oft-expressed desire to retire has always been with the tacit understanding that those aligned to him would be taken care of.

For instance, he had pushed hard for his former political secretary Liow

Tiong Lai to contest in Raub and for fellow Pahang politician and Wanita chief Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen to replace Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh in Gopeng.

When he could not get his way, he reportedly threatened to retire, something he had done several times in the past. But Dr Ling called his bluff this time and the result was that Liow ended up contesting in Bentong (the seat vacated by Lim) and Dr Ng in Raub.

"The bottomline is succession. Politics is like that. There will always be leaders who are impatient about leaders who have overstayed," says a Wanita MCA figure.

There are many ways to play the game and this, she says in a worried tone, "is one way of sending the message ... because if things were really going well, it wouldn't have come to this sort of head."

Others say it is less a question of succession than people trying to position themselves for the future.

"There is no split but there will be camps and the camps will grow more distinct if no action is taken. People will start aligning especially those who feel they have worked hard and not got anything," says another MCA politician.

But Ling has shown no sign of going just yet - his inner circle knows that.

Like other heads of BN component parties, he belongs to the Mahathir era whose political lives are closely tied up to that of the Umno president.

This despite Dr Ling frequently telling the party leaders not to overstay, to make way for younger people, and that positions are like temporary occupation licences which need to be renewed all the time.

Actually, Dr Ling is only 56 - still youthful for Asian politics. But he has been president since 1986 which makes this his fifth term and, hence, a certain impatience among the second echelon.

Or as the above CC member put it: "If you stay too long, you do not allow for a smooth transition."

There is no doubt the Ling-Lim relationship has been severely strained.

The fact that Lim has not indicated he will relinquish his No 2 post is as good as saying: don't count me out just yet.

Many leaders are worried stiff. They loathe the prospect of having to take sides in the event of a top level contest because many of them still remember the bitter fallout from the fights in the 1980s.

Says PJ Selatan MP and parliamentary secretary Donald Lim: "The last thing the grassroots want is another party crisis. They want a smooth transition."

This is something people outside the political party system have always found so difficult to understand. The outside view is that contest is democratic, a healthy form of renewal and should be encouraged.

But those inside are wary because of the period of political instability that tends to follow big fights. Malaysian politics is such that the loser often cannot accept defeat and the winner insists on taking all.

Much of what happens from here will depend on how Dr Ling handles things.

As former party deputy president Datuk Lee Kim Sai told the Chinese papers: "He tied the knot, he must now untie it."

The master politician in Dr Ling cannot be underestimated. But even master politicians come to crossroads and he is at one such crossroad at the moment.

"I'm confident the president will be able to sort this out," says loyalist Dr Sak.

According to the above Wanita figure, the president must now be seen as assiduously taking in the views of every CC member and hold frequent dialogues with the rank-and-file.

"And at the end of the day, it's very much about satisfying people who have worked hard.

"He must negotiate for more for the party, to be seen as having tried hard."

But the bigger problem ahead is how Dr Ling handles the leadership transition because Lim's outburst at the CC meeting is a signal that his supporters are unlikely to take things lying down from now.

It will take all that Dr Ling has to craft out a compromise, an approach he has spouted often in the past and which he will now have to find new use and meaning for.