

Ah Lek: A problem

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MCA deputy leader urges party to heed

MCA deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek has been very much in the news lately, especially for his opposition to the party's acquisition of Nanyang Press Holdings Bhd. In an exclusive interview with CHOW KUM HOR barely 48 hours before MCA's extraordinary general meeting today, he gives his reasons for his objections

Q: Can you describe the current state of affairs in MCA?

A: I am very saddened ... I totally agree with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that all parties will have problems, but since the general election, all these problems are created by one man in my party, president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik.

As to why he chose to do so, I until today do not understand. We are supposed to be working together with the Chinese community. The MCA should be helping them. That is the role of MCA and the Chinese community expects us to do. In the case of Nanyang, it was created by one man. He was warned in the presidential council and central committee of the dangers involved. I have received a lot of feedback from leaders of guilds and associations. These are all our friends.

These people are always able to co-operate with us and understand the Government and find solutions to problems in the Chinese community. Why are we turning our backs on them? Why are we not listening to them now? If you look at the pros and cons of Nanyang, then we should forget it and move on. And yet the president refused to listen.

The Chinese are not fools. This may turn into votes against us.

Q: You mentioned that all problems faced by MCA since the last general election are caused by one man. What are the other issues besides the Nanyang takeover?

A: His intention to resign as Cabinet Minister has created an image problem for the party ... The SJK (C) Damansara relocation issue was also not handled well.

Q: But the decision to close down the school was made by the school board ...

A: Yes, but we need to look into the problems of the people there. Of course, there is also the Nanyang takeover issue. I also never created the problem in Batu Pahat. I never created problems for him to resign and he tried to put the blame on

me. He was in Batu Pahat. He could have explained to the reporters that I did not ask him to resign. I had to defend myself because it affects my integrity. He could have clarified it to the Press.

Q: How important is party unity now?

A: It is extremely important. We have different opinions on this (Nanyang) issue and he (Dr Ling) refused to pay heed to the sentiments of the Chinese community. It is my desire to see that the party unite to face the challenges ahead. If the present situation persists, the party will face a lot of more difficult tasks.

Q: You are saying that the split in the party is caused by the president?

A: Yes. It is caused by only one man. There is no problem with the other leaders in the party. We don't have problems with the other party leaders. The Nanyang problem has worsened the split.

Q: What about the other party leaders who support him? Are they part of the problem as well?

A: No, because the fish head is rotting. He himself admitted it. I totally agree with him.

Q: Some people say that the roadshow organised by MCA leaders opposed to the takeover has worsened the rift in the party. There were opinions that such differences could be resolved behind closed-doors.

A: We were not able to convince the president to abort the takeover but we don't want to go down in history as totally disregarding the feelings of the Chinese community. That is why we have to go down (to the ground).

If the president is so convinced it is a good deal, why is he so scared to allow leaders to explain? We have not prevented our people from attending their roadshows. Why are they so afraid? They should allow members to listen to both sides.

Q: There were allegations that Opposition members were also there and some say that you are co-

operating with the Opposition.

A: The briefings were for members only. If there are reporters there, we tell them not to write. Usually, we hold a Press conference after that. It is purely for our members there.

Q: Were there sufficient security measures taken to prevent Opposition members from attending the roadshows?

A: They are not supposed to be there. If you are not invited, and you attend, there is something wrong with them. They must be mad. They were not welcomed. It is only meant for party leaders.

Q: There are some claims that the Nanyang issue has been turned into a leadership issue in MCA.

A: No. This is totally baseless. We wanted to avoid this issue even after the deal was done. We told him not to go ahead. If we have an agenda, we would have told him to go on because we could exploit it. How can we exploit the situation if the eight of us try to convince the president not to go ahead with the takeover. We are not exploiting it. This is not true. It must be coming from a very desperate man trying to do damage-control for him to stay on.

Q: The Nanyang problem has to a certain extent caused the party to suffer. Will you take responsibility

of leadership

sentiments of Chinese community

A: Of course, the meeting was cordial. That was the meeting.

Q: Dr Ling claimed that you and vice-president Datuk Chua Jui Meng asked for the Huaren trustees meeting to be convened but during the meeting, you and Datuk Chua said insufficient notice was given.

A: Dr Ling did not call for a trustees meeting but an extraordinary general meeting of Huaren Holdings. That meeting would include the board of directors. We were surprised that the board of directors of Huaren Holdings were there that day. Jimmy (Chua) said we never asked for this meeting. We only called for a board of trustees meeting, not the board meeting. The trustees meeting was not formally convened because no notice was given. We only want a trustees meeting because this is more of a political issue.

Q: Huaren is looking for a strategic partner now.

A: Yes, but only after the hoo-hah. PM has also come out with an advice (asking MCA to dispose of part of the shares in Nanyang). This was in line with what we were asking the president to do.

Q: But you wanted MCA to divest 100 per cent of Nanyang's shares

A: Yes, we wanted it that way. If the president says MCA still wants some minority share, we could have accepted it. He just refused to listen. He went ahead with it.

Q: Is there a possibility of a reconciliation between you and Dr Ling?

A: That, time will tell. He is more concerned about trying to promote his own agenda than to find solutions.

Q: Is Dr Ling still fit to lead MCA?

A: That is not for me to say. It is up to the party members to decide. I have been protecting his image all this while. The promises he made he does not fulfil ... It is time the public as well as members know what sort of person the party president is.

Q: Based on your arguments, there is a need for MCA to re-invent itself. If it can't, do you see a possibility of BN intervening? Many years ago, Dr Mahathir removed MCA acting president Datuk Dr Neo Yee Pan from his Cabinet post. Do you see such things happening in MCA in the near future?

A: I leave it to the wisdom of the

Prime Minister because, as BN chairman, he is very concerned. What happens in MCA will affect the performance of BN in the next general election. You cannot blame the PM for showing concern. The problems facing the MCA can erode support for the party and eventually the BN.

Q: There has been a lot of rumours circulating that your meeting with Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Deputy Prime Minister and deputy Umno president) recently was to influence Umno to intervene in the internal affairs of MCA. Is that so?

A: No. As deputy president of the party, it is my duty to inform not just the Deputy Prime Minister, but everyone affected by this. It is only natural for me to do so. I am duty-bound to inform Pak Lah and get advice from him.

Q: You are known as MCA's "reluctant politician". For years, you keep saying that you want to leave, but until now you have not. When are you going to call it a day in politics?

A: When I was told to stand for the Bentong Parliamentary by-election in 1989, I was already very reluctant. I had already made up my mind to retire during the 1990 general election. Again I was persuaded by the president to contest but I told him I want to go off in the next general election. Dr Ling said: "If you leave, it will be like chopping off one of my arms." When the 1995 general election came, he said there was a split in the party created by (former MCA deputy president Tan Sri Lee) Kim Sai and he asked me to continue. Again I agreed to do another term. In 1999, I did not seek re-election in Bentong. Dr Ling again tried to persuade me. Just before he submitted the list of MCA candidates to the Prime Minister, he called me to ask if I would change my mind. I told him no. I want to remain in the party as long as I can to solve its problems, to gain back confidence from the Chinese support.

Q: What are your plans? The party election is next year. Will you challenge the president?

A: The election is only next year. Why talk about positions now? We should put our minds together to solve MCA's problems. It is too early to talk about elections. What we have done over the past one year is nothing to be proud of.

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for this?

A: No, I advised him (Dr Ling) not to proceed with the deal. He was so stubborn and refused to listen. I told him that a vote swing of less than four per cent in Pahang can mean the downfall of the State to the Opposition. It is not too late to win back Chinese support.

Q: How relevant is MCA now to the electorate?

A: I am extremely concerned. There are other component parties within BN.

Q: You are referring to Gerakan?

A: They can go to Gerakan or even Umno. The Umno *wakil rakyat* also have Chinese voters. The voters can always go to Umno if they think MCA is not effective. The next general election is going to tell whether the Chinese will support us in view of the latest problems faced by the party. If sentiments of the Chinese community are translated into votes, MCA could lose a lot of seats and may not even be relevant. That is why I always wanted to avoid problems in the party.

Q: How would you describe your ties with Dr Ling now?

A: Bad. Uncordial.

Q: But after the board of trustees unofficial meeting last Thursday, all of you agreed that the meeting was cordial.