

Leaders should reunite after family quarrel

STAR 16 DEC 2001



It was not a secret meeting, as some newspapers had reported. After all, the MCA's rebellious Youth chief had met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in full view of those present at the Sultan Abdul Halim airport in Kedah.

The meeting at the airport's VIP room lasted barely 10 minutes but it was enough to spark a series of speculations.

When cornered by reporters, the usually outspoken Ong Tee Keat merely said it was a "personal matter."

Party president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik told newsmen in Kedah on Friday that if the PM was to offer any advice, he would have spoken about the importance of party unity.

Ong, together with Youth Assembly Speaker Lim Hong Sang and secretary-general Yew Teong Look have been blamed for the fracas at the Aug 3 MCA Youth annual general meeting.

Last week, vice-president Datuk Chua Jui Meng was seen attending a breaking fast gathering hosted by Dr Mahathir after chairing an Umno supreme council meeting. Speculation went on about Chua's presence until it dawned on the press that all ministers were invited to the function.

Chua, who was replaced as Kedah MCA liaison committee chairman, is regarded as a potential challenger to Dr Ling in next year's party polls.

Umno leaders, particularly Dr Mahathir and his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, have so far refrained from making any statements on the MCA leadership crisis.

Dr Mahathir has said he believed that the MCA leaders would be able to resolve their problems while Abdullah advised the Barisan Nasional's second component party to end the crisis fast.

MCA leaders have continuously spoken about the need to allow the democratic process to settle the matter - meaning, let the party elections decide the outcome.

But it is clear that Barisan leaders are getting more edgy with the developments in the MCA, particularly the daily mudslinging by the rival factions.

The lack of discipline among the younger MCA members has become a topic of discussion at breaking fast functions hosted by Umno leaders, with some describing this breakdown in command as a dangerous trend.

The concern of Umno leaders, privately expressed, is understandable because all Barisan component parties share a similar structure.

While the feuding factions in the MCA would be allowed some room to campaign in the run-up to the party polls, they should not be surprised if Umno leaders stepped in to offer advice in order to ensure that Barisan is not affected.

The MCA squabble is essentially an internal matter. Although the stakes are high, MCA leaders must understand that, as in all family quarrels, they must be able to come together once their differences are resolved.

Although emotions run high, there must not be a "winner take all" attitude because talent should be recognised by the party leaders. That is essentially what democracy is all about.

As the backbone of Barisan, Umno would want to see the ability of MCA to continue providing stability in the next general election.

In 1999, the MCA won in 28 parliamentary and 70 state constituencies, its best-ever performance, and also delivered crucial votes to Umno candidates.

Under the leadership of Dr Ling, the party has essentially been able to deliver the votes. The approval to set up Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman can be considered a

reward for a job well done.

Although Barisan has 14 component members, Umno, MCA and MIC are the only members that have ties to the Alliance under Tunku Abdul Rahman.

It is a long-tested relationship and the presidents of these three parties have a special bond, which other component leaders can never have.

There are six months to go before the MCA polls. Both sides will need plenty of stamina but they must never forget that as MCA leaders their performance will be gauged by the grassroots members and community.

More importantly, they must not allow their problems to be exploited by others. A few Gerakan leaders, including party president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, have made unfriendly comments about the MCA.

Although the rivalry between the MCA and Gerakan is well known, such statements are ill-advised and would be perceived as rubbing it in.

MCA leaders had correctly stayed out when a group of dissidents led by then MP for Batu Datuk Joseph Chong opposed Dr Lim during their party polls some years back.

As in any family, there will be moments of greatness and crisis, but the members must always remain together.