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Battlelines drawn within MCA

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"NEXT time, must use the Bukit Jalil Stadium to accommodate such crowd," an MCA member was overheard mumbling as he made his way into the Shah Alam Club hall last Wednesday night, only to find the seats all taken up.

He was among the over 1,500 grassroots Selangor MCA leaders who attended a briefing held by the so-called "Team B" within the party who were opposed to the takeover of Nanyang Press Holdings Bhd.

Although the remark about having a party briefing in a stadium is most likely due to the limited seats, it also underscores a hidden pride that so many leaders turned up for the event.

By 8pm, there was only standing room but the crowd continued to stream in as late as two hours later.

In view of the fact that many grassroots leaders had earlier in the day allegedly received threatening phone calls to stay away from the programme, and given the mere one-and-a-half days it took to plan the gathering, the large turnout even surprised the organisers.

Six MCA central committee members, out of the eight who voted against the deal on May 30, spoke at length on their objections. They were vice-presidents Datuk Chua Jui Meng and Datuk Chan Kong Choy, Youth head Datuk Ong Tee Keat, deputy Wanita head Datin Paduka Dr Tan Yee Kew, Selangor executive councillor Datuk Tang See Hang and International Trade and Industry Ministry Parliamentary secretary Datuk Fu Ah Kiow.

The others who opposed were deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek and lawyer Datuk Wong Mook Leong but the latter was absent that night.

Lim was mobbed by his supporters the moment he stepped out of his Range Rover, not unlike the treatment he had received during last year's MCA Youth general assembly.

"We have fired the first salvo tonight," said an aide to Health Minister Chua.

During the May 30 central committee meeting, 32 members voted in favour of the takeover of Nanyang Press Holdings by MCA's investment arm Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd. Nanyang Press Holdings publishes Nanyang Siang Pau and the China Press dailies.

The "rebellious eight" who opposed cited the backlash from the Chinese electorate who perceive that the editorial independence of the two newspapers could be affected after a takeover by a political party.

Chinese media, after all, is said to be one of the three pillars of the community's identity in the country, with the others being Chinese education and Hua Tuan, or Chinese-based non-governmental organisations.

"What does Dr Ling know about the Chinese media? He can't even read Chinese," Chan told the crowd on Wednesday, referring to the English-educated party president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik.

BN can ill-afford a vote swing from the Chinese who delivered many seats during the 1999 general election. A former MCA vice-president noted that if the situation persists, many BN leaders may not even want to stand for the general election, scheduled in 2004, for fear of an embarrassing outcome.

The takeover of Nanyang Press Holdings was also shrouded in secrecy, with at least two of the four trustees of Huaren Holdings - Lim and Chua - kept in the dark over the deal until the last minute.

The deal between Huaren Management Sdn Bhd and the previous owner of the 72.35 per cent stake in Nanyang Press was signed on May 28, but consent

from the central committee was obtained only two days later. (Huaren Management is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Huaren Holdings.)

The joke that a RM2 company took over a RM230 million equity certainly did not amuse some MCA leaders.

At least not if a 100 per cent bank loan was needed, and as collateral using virtually all of Huaren's assets in Star Publications Bhd and Nanyang Press Holdings, with an aggregate worth of about RM800 million at the present market value.

With a campaign to boycott Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press already launched, the financial risk of the takeover gets bigger.

But beyond the opposing views of party leaders on the feasibility of the takeover, a more subtle political battleline has been drawn as the Dr Ling-Lim rivalry again comes to the fore.

True, the voting on the deal in the central committee has nothing to do with political alignment, but too much bad blood has been spilled since then, creating the perception that one is either for Dr Ling or Lim.

The previously non-partisan Chua, regarded as the deciding factor in the feud between the MCA's top two men, appeared to have joined "Team B", boosting the faction considerably.

(Observers recently drew comparison of the "Team A-Team B" rivalry of Umno in 1987 when Tengku Razaleigh mounted a challenge against Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for the party presidency, and the crisis in MCA now.)

Probably drawing from Shakespearean inspiration, Chua told the gathering in Shah Alam: "It is not that I do not love the president, but I love MCA, BN and my country more."

The nationwide roadshows, organised under the cloak of "briefing sessions", are also being held by both factions, in an attempt to woo the grassroots.

Last Wednesday's briefing for Selangor leaders in Shah Alam, the first in the series of a nationwide tour, was also aimed at causing a dent to the reputation of Dr Ling, who is the State liaison committee head. The presence of four of six MPs from Selangor there only made matters worse for the party president.

Hours earlier, four Kedah MCA State Assemblymen and two MPs, met with Dr Ling to express support for the president and asked the State party chief Chua to "behave himself".

Apparently, both sides have no qualms about a battle on the enemy's own turf.

Whether home advantage or as visitors, this is the first time grassroots members have been so aggressively wooed, when previously, the Dr Ling-Lim rivalry had been confined to top party leaders.

"Team B" is bent on overturning the central committee's decision and one way to achieve this is to call for an extraordinary general assembly and let MCA's highest body decide on the issue.

As the opposing forces try to convince at least one-third of the delegates to either call or stop the meeting, another possibility looms large: the passing of a no-confidence motion against either side.

At least two divisions, including Selayang, which is one of the largest in the country, have passed such a resolution against Dr Ling.

Riding high with sentiments of the Chinese community behind them, Lim's camp have a more legitimate platform to mount a challenge now than previously, when the rivalry centred around internal power struggles.

Chua could have foreseen the possibility of the EGM and this probably explains why he made known his stand earlier, and not just before the party polls in 2002, as had been widely expected.

As it is, members are talking of a Chua-Chan alliance who will go for the top two party posts, with "reluctant politician" Lim finally getting

the retirement he had wanted all this while.

It is too early to say if the challenger or the challenged will overcome the odds, but it is definitely foolish to underestimate the edge that comes with incumbency.

Both sides are now preparing for the battle cry but ultimately the fate of the leaders - and to a certain extent - the Chinese community, lies in the hands that mark the little crosses during the general assembly.