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Courting Chinese votes

Chow Kum Hor

THE usually mundane news of appointments in government departments created political ripples of sorts last week when it was reported that two Malaysian Chinese will be appointed as the Prime Minister's advisors.

It is said that the duo - a newspaper editor and a lawyer - will daily brief Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on reports in the Chinese newspapers. And if the grapevine is anything to go by, one of them will also periodically update Dr Mahathir on sentiments of the English-educated Chinese while the other, the Chinese-educated.

The last Malaysian Chinese whom a Prime Minister had such direct access to was probably Datuk Michael Chen who served as Tun Abdul Razak's Parliamentary secretary.

It appears that Dr Mahathir wants to go one step ahead of the weekly Cabinet meetings and regular discussions with Chinese community leaders to get a better understanding of the second-largest ethnic group in Malaysia.

After all, Barisan Nasional relied to a large extent on the Chinese votes during the 1999 general election following the split among the Malays. A slight swing in the Chinese votes can spell the downfall of more BN "safe seats" or even several States, in addition to the current Pas-led Kelantan and Terengganu.

For example, a 121-vote swing in the Pekan Parliamentary constituency in Pahang can be anathema to Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak's political career. The Defence Minister, who is also a former Prime Minister's son, polled only a 241-majority during the 1999 general election.

And then there is BN's defeat in the Lunas by-election in which the Chinese were said to have delivered the death blow. Only four of the 10 Chinese majority locations in Lunas voted for BN, compared to all during the 1999 general election.

Historically, the threat of the Chinese votes swinging in favour of the Opposition is real.

During the last major split involving the Malays, which saw the formation of Semangat 46 in 1987, the Chinese-based DAP won 20 Parliamentary seats and almost took control of Penang during the 1990 general election.

It was one of the DAP's best performance ever, having co-operated with Semangat 46 under the Gagasan Rakyat coalition.

MCA was then still reeling from the aftermath of its Tan Koon Swan-Datuk Neo Yee Pan crisis, the deposit-taking co-operatives scandal and confronted with a host of Chinese education and cultural issues. A similar pattern is developing now. The newly-formed Parti Keadilan Nasional has robbed Umno of a substantial Malay base.

MCA now is facing a leadership crisis, with issues like the relocation of SJK (C) Damansara, the non-Bumiputera quota for admission into public universities and the Vision School proposal further eroding its support from the Chinese. Under the self-styled Alternative Front, Keadilan, Pas, DAP and Parti Rakyat Malaysia are building on their growing influence to capture more seats in the next general election, scheduled in 2004.

"Given the swing of Malay votes from the BN in the last general election, the Chinese votes are becoming more and more crucial for the coalition," said Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia political scientist Prof Dr P. Ramasamy.

The Chinese fear of Pas' Islamic extremism has to some degree been diluted with the presence of DAP in the Opposition coalition.

Pas leaders who once labelled Umno as "infidels" for co-operating with non-Muslims, have also shed their flowing robe-and-turban image. Now, many are proficient in English, wear designer suits and some were even seen shaking hands with Chinese pork-sellers in the run-up to the Lunas and Teluk Kemang by-elections.

At a time of eroding Muslim support, Umno is also facing pressure to adopt a more Islamic outlook - a move which could alienate the Chinese who delivered many seats for Umno during the 1999 polls. Previously, the spectre of Pas' Islamic State was so frightening that some Chinese dissatisfied with the Government would still vote for BN, whom they considered the lesser of the two evils.

If Umno chooses to re-create a more Islamic image, the Chinese would be indifferent as to whether Pas or BN is in power.

As it is, one of the major concerns of the Chinese over the Opposition, over which Pas wields considerable influence, is whether there will be an overzealous pursuit of Islamic principles.

Racial jokes poke fun at how drinking and gambling are synonymous with Chinese the world over, although for the majority of Malaysian Chinese, it is nothing less than a vice.

"Some of Pas' policies like the ban on alcohol and cultural shows did not go down well with the Chinese," said DAP national vice-chairman Lim Guan Eng.

The Chinese who control a large stake in the corporate sector will also have to consider the effects of voting in a coalition which has no track record in managing the economy. As for fears that the BN may sway too much to win the support of the Muslim electorate, a journalist noted that Umno will always be a few steps behind Pas in the implementation of Islamic principles.

"It is too early to say how the Chinese will vote in the next general election. It is usually two months before the election that matters most, not several years," Ramasamy pointed out.

As the Opposition boasts that the Lunas by-election result is the harbinger of BN's downfall come 2004, some say BN's defeat was the electorate's way of telling the Government to buck up.

It does not mean that the Chinese would throw their support behind the loose coalition of Opposition parties in the next general election.

That the Chinese votes are crucial for the BN and the Opposition now is a foregone conclusion.

Consider the latest development on Sunday when Dr Mahathir announced that Chinese members of Sabah's Parti Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat (Akar) will be able to join Umno following Akar's dissolution.

While the BN government can talk about building Chinese schools, cultural development programmes and financial assistance, the Opposition will have a harder time to allay fears among the Chinese about the Islamic state. Still, the DAP can pull out of the coalition to detach itself from Pas' stigma, just as Sarawak DAP has done, in anticipation of the State election.

MCA on its part, needs to keep its house in order and not let the current feud between president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek affect its performance in the next general election. In this respect, the possibility of BN intervening in MCA's affairs cannot be ruled out if rivalry in the party gets out of hand.

During the MCA crisis in the mid-1980s, acting president Neo was removed as Housing and Local Government Minister - a death knell for his political career.

The "invisible hand" has not moved into MCA yet but if BN leaders perceive MCA's latest internal crisis as a stumbling block in winning Chinese support, an intervention is possible.

BN and the Opposition will be trying hard to court the Chinese, whose votes can alter the country's political landscape during the next polls. The ball is now in the Chinese electorate's court, and the little crosses they draw on the ballot papers must at the end of the day, benefit everyone, regardless of race, creed or religion.