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MCA wins test but not yet the trial?

IT WAS perhaps the biggest test MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik had had to face from within his own party. The bigger number of delegates at the extraordinary general meeting who voted for the party's decision to buy into a Chinese newspaper company meant that Dr Ling passed that test. For the party, the decision to leave it to 2,207 delegates to decide at Sunday's meeting shows that democracy was alive. He was right, of course - a win is a win, whether you win by one, 10, 50 or 150 votes. But surely he must also realise that the 157-vote margin that carried his decision for MCA to buy control of Nanyang Press Holdings Bhd shows there is a lot of patching up to do.

Within Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition led by Umno, the MCA's role is to deliver the Chinese votes. This it has done satisfactorily. In the 1999 general elections, it was accepted that the Chinese had thrown their support for the BN and helped the coalition inflict the worst defeat ever on DAP, which used to have a huge influence among urban Chinese but now, especially after 1999, regarded little more than a minnow. Of course, the MCA could not have succeeded without the help of Umno and the other parties in the coalition, including Gerakan which is seen as a sibling rival to the MCA within the BN family.

Even Dr Ling's "victory" on Sunday was attributed by some to the strong views expressed the day earlier by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on the opposition towards MCA's purchase of the newspaper company which publishes two big circulation dailies, Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press. This belief is formed based on the outcome of the voting on the same issue at the MCA Youth level, where the Youth leaders had voted overwhelmingly against the resolution to buy into Nanyang Press. The theory that Dr Mahathir, who is BN chairman and Umno president, helped swing the support for Dr Ling will probably remain unproven, but there are enough people who feel that perhaps there is a leadership crisis within MCA. This is especially so when Dr Ling's deputy, Datuk Lim Ah Lek, two of the vice presidents and, apparently, a major portion of the Youth leaders were among those who disagreed with Dr Ling on the issue.

Such a crisis will destroy unity within the party and weaken it. A weak MCA will not be of much use to the BN. It is important, therefore, for the two factions that had been at loggerheads over the deal to close ranks and abide by the resolution that has been endorsed by the EGM on Sunday. More importantly, they must keep in mind that although more delegates had voted for the resolution, it does not necessarily mean that more members of MCA agree that the party should be buying into the newspaper company. And certainly, it does not mean that there are more Chinese out there than not - many of whom voted for the BN in the last general elections - agree that a political party should have control over newspapers. The MCA, through its investment arm Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd, already has control over The Star, the country's largest English daily in terms of circulation.

Both Dr Ling and Lim must join hands to explain to party members and the Chinese in general why the purchase of Nanyang Press will be in the interest of the community. Dr Ling alone will not be able to do so convincingly, especially if Lim and those who had opposed the resolution continue to fight it even after last Sunday's EGM. They need to go down to party members and the voters together. A lot of people, not just the Chinese Malaysians, thought that a newspaper under the control of a

political party cannot be independent in its views. This is not quite true. The Star is not a party organ, neither are the New Straits Times or Utusan Malaysia despite the fact that they are controlled by political parties. What they do not do is to fan racialist sentiments that have, of late, threatened many aspects of Malaysian life.

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