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MCA must stop this infighting

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MALAYSIAN Chinese politics today is distinguished by four States simply because that is where most Chinese live - the Federal Territory, Selangor, Perak and Johor. At independence, Chinese formed the majority (or the biggest single group) virtually in all States except Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu.

Now, they are the majority group only in Penang whose state government since 1969 has been in the hands of Gerakan, a rival of the Malaysian Chinese Association then and even now.

Last Sunday I was introduced by Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Taib to an obvious ally of MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik who delivered "an instant tutorial" on the ongoing feud in the party's feud.

Malaysian Chinese, though the second biggest racial group, are powerful, influential and dominant out of proportion to their numbers. They hold this position - and are in the process of strengthening it - through multi-lingual education, hard work, access to capital and credit networking, clever politicking and entrepreneurial skills.

Merdeka (independence), the New Economic Policy and subsequent economic and development plans brought them unprecedented opportunities for expansion and diversification of their activities, with Malay partners or without Bumiputera front men and women.

It is in this context and, even more so, with the Government's continued emphasis on economic growth where ethnicity appears to have been downgraded, that Chinese politics (and MCA's) should be viewed. This is also why MCA should remain undivided and relatively strong.

Whoever leads the ruling party in the next general election has to prove himself as a person who is clean and able, not only to think up policies and implement them, but execute them in a way that will win a majority of voters of all races.

The question of winning (how big or small the majority) or even losing Putrajaya depends on having the right leader.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said that the current term is his last. That is not a matter for him to decide, it's a matter for Umno and more importantly, for the people of Malaysia.

Walter Lippmann, in Roosevelt Is Gone in April 1945's Herald Tribune, penned this: "The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in other men the conviction and the will to carry on."

Whereas Charles De Gaulle once said that "Men are of no importance. What counts is who commands".

It does seem that the trend in political science is or has for some time been dominated by a pragmatic non-doctrinaire approach. Though this doesn't mean that political ideology is completely out, politics has become, as Burke has described it: "... a matter of prudence, expediency, circumstances, utility, experience, history, loyalty and reverence, and not the abstract reasoning".

I had foolishly thought what appeared as the leadership crisis within the nation's second biggest ruling group was over. I was wrong. There remains an intense rivalry within the MCA and among the Chinese-based parties within the ruling coalition - each wanting to be perceived as "more Chinese than the other." Just like the battle between Umno and Pas for the leadership of the Malays.

What has created the perception that Chinese civilisation, Islam and

Malay rights and privileges are being threatened?

Ours is a short history, 43 years old, and within this brief period, I know many Malays and Chinese who became Malaysians but who have now gone back to being Chinese and Malays or Bumiputeras again, perhaps as a result of increasing racial polarisation.

Or is it because of the impact of an increasingly powerful China or the notion of an Islamic renaissance?

For sure, both peoples have come under threat in the past. I shall not go into it now. However, I would like to recall how the MCA came into being. The British colonial regime, faced with the armed revolt by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) which began in 1948, actively encouraged the establishment of the MCA a year later to mobilise Chinese support for the British campaign to defeat the MCP armed terrorism, and to assist Umno (formed in 1946 to fight against Malayan Union, now disguised as Malaysian Malaysia) in the fight for Merdeka which was achieved in 1957.

The MCA became an effective facilitator of the war (or the emergency) against the largely Chinese MCP because the party then had the strong support of all classes of Chinese, of every political hue except the Red. MCA has been an important and influential segment of the ruling group since 1955. The MCP was disbanded in 1989 when it accepted Dr Mahathir's Government's amnesty brokered by Thailand.

The Barisan Nasional (known as the Alliance before 1974) had its origins in the Sino-Malay co-operation between Umno and MCA in 1952 to contest the Kuala Lumpur municipal election.

A quick glance (and examination) might be enough to suggest the improbability of the MCA leadership succession feud between Dr Ling Liong Sik's faction and deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek's coming to any conclusion until the MCA's presidential election next year.

Lim insisted that Dr Ling had said he would give up the leadership by 2002. However, Dr Ling's "two supporters" and also "witnesses" at the Dr Ling-Lim talks - Tan Sri William Chek Lin Kwai (treasurer-general) and Datuk Dr Sak Cheng Lum (deputy secretary-general) had disputed Lim's claim. Lim said the two had distorted the actual situation. Dr Ling has refused to say anything, leaving his allies to do the talking for him.

If the two leaders could not come to an agreement after 10 rounds of talks, I doubt if any further rounds of cakap-cakap would make any difference. They have "hurt" each other almost beyond repair.

MCA unity is important especially during the prevailing political circumstances because it is said Umno can no longer easily derive great strength from the majority race. The strength, therefore, no longer lies in numbers.

MCA has got to prove itself the main political vehicle of the Chinese, able to think up policies that are acceptable to Umno, and to present them in a way that all races will benefit. MCA has done much to make Tunku Abdul Rahman (TAR) College what it is today, one of the great success stories in Malaysian education. The question is not whether TAR College will be granted university status, but rather when, and I think, it will be sooner rather than later.

Dr Ling and Lim should talk about the future prospects of MCA and the direction of the Malaysian Chinese in politics and the importance it attaches to co-operation with Umno, rather than giving rise to fears that paralysis within its leadership may even contribute to its and Umno's nearly half of a century of political dominance ending in 2004.

It is imperative that both factions in MCA must aim at supporting the current Dr Ling-Lim leadership, not undermining it. Let the party polls decide who it wants in 2002.

An out-of-touch MCA will lose Chinese support. Instead listen to the

electorate and wipe out corruption, favouritism and increase transparency.

I believe I am not wrong in saying that during the last several general elections the DAP's and Gerakan's share of the Chinese vote was larger than MCA's.

Indeed, according to a Singapore-based research group, DAP had more Chinese support (before the 1999 polls) than MCA and Gerakan combined. But MCA and Gerakan won more seats, and in the case of Gerakan also the Penang State Government.

Whatever, I caution all not to make the mistake of playing opposition politics in the ruling coalition. Until Malaysian politics is de-communalised, a bit of politicking is acceptable as long as national security is not threatened.

I have great faith in realpolitik. Good Sino-Malay relations and racial harmony must always endure. Meanwhile, MCA must initiate a process of healing even though it does not appear to be on the card of the protagonists.

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