

20/12/2001

Ong keeps his party foes guessing

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FOR a man known to draw supporters and antagonise enemies with his fiery speeches and scathing remarks, it is ironic that MCA Youth chief Datuk Ong Tee Keat is now in the limelight for his silence.

Ong, who is also Deputy Youth and Sports Minister, has gone on leave one day after his hush-hush meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Kedah, last Thursday.

Since the meeting, Ong has been incommunicado, keeping his political foes guessing as to what transpired during the 10-minute encounter. Journalists who failed to locate him joked that Ong could be in the Tora Bora caves with Osama bin Laden.

Dr Mahathir had said that in the meeting, Ong had assured him that he (Ong) wanted to put to an end to the problems plaguing the movement. This received the blessings of the Prime Minister, who is also the BN chairman.

While details of the meeting are not immediately known, it is one factor the MCA central committee (CC) meeting today will consider, when deliberating Ong's fate.

The presidential council (PC) on Dec 7 endorsed, in a vote of 15 to five, the veterans committee's findings implicating Ong for premeditating the fracas at the Youth AGM on Aug 3.

Besides Ong, the other similarly accused is assembly speaker Lim Hong Sang. The report also censured Ong, Lim and Youth secretary-general Yew Teong Look for the ruckus.

If Team A CC members today decide to punish Ong, they would have to answer why they refused to give an opportunity to the Youth chief to fulfil his promise to the Prime Minister.

(Team A refers to the faction aligned to president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik while Team B, which Ong is part of, is led by deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek.)

But if Ong goes unpunished, party members will question why Ong was spared for his alleged role in one of the most shameful events in the party's 52-year history.

Possible actions against Ong include sacking, resulting in him automatically losing his Youth chief's post and most likely, his deputy ministership.

However, sacking could create a backlash from Ong's sympathisers - a move the politically ambitious would rather avoid considering 30 per cent of the delegates to the general assembly are from the Youth.

Ong's grassroots support from Youth leaders is still strong.

If he is suspended, the question will be for how long as the duration will determine if Ong, who has declared he wanted to defend his post, can stand for the election, expected next June.

Whether suspension or sacking, Ong's absence will automatically see his deputy Hoo Seong Chang of Team A assume the movement's top post. This will shift the advantage of incumbency in the wing from Ah Lek's camp to Dr Ling's.

Party members will also be closely watching if the CC will act against Yew, a presidential-loyalist, who has been censured for the fracas.

In any case, Yew has little to lose. He was sworn in as a senator in the aftermath of the Nanyang takeover controversy and is also a presidential appointee to the CC.

Realising the importance of the CC meeting today, both factions have

been pitted in a show of strength, with three almost successive Press conferences yesterday.

Team B yesterday challenged Team A CC members to resign en bloc by 5pm today to pave the way for a fresh election - a challenge turned down by Team A.

Selangor Youth head Datuk Ch'ng Toh Eng later issued to the Press a document outlining 52 reasons why Ong contributed to the problems in the Youth wing. Some immediately associate it with the book "50 Dalil Mengapa Anwar Tidak Boleh Jadi PM".

With no end in sight to the MCA Youth woes, there is a possibility the CC may today decide that the party headquarters take over the running of the movement, rendering all Youth CC members powerless.