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Will Lone Ranger continue riding?

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MCA Youth leader Datuk Ong Tee Keat is on unfamiliar turf. For once in his political career, he has forged an alliance - even if only with those opposed to party president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik.

In his 15 years of active party politics, Ong was known to be a 'lone ranger'. The former political secretary to ex-MCA deputy president Datuk Lee Kim Sai is not affiliated to any particular party leader, nor is he known to have a passion for 'sycophancy politics'. However, he has a large following among MCA Youth members, evident by his election as secretary-general for three terms between 1990 and 1999.

Even in Selangor MCA, he is a loner with his own set of followers, mostly youths. Ong, who is also Deputy Youth and Sports Minister, owns up to the fact with a reply on how he had to fight his way to the top.

'I was the only candidate who had to contest in the last party elections,' says the six-footer who faced challenges in practically all party elections since 1993.

In the 1999 MCA Youth elections, all the major posts were brokered and saw no contests except that for Youth head. Ong defeated Datuk Loke Yuen Yow, a one-time political secretary to Ling.

Ong's new allegiance to the faction aligned to deputy MCA president Datuk Lim Ah Lek, who is at loggerheads with the party president, does not spare him the jibes.

In fact, in recent months, Ong has increasingly come under attack for his defiant stance against Ling. Ong earned the wrath of Ling's supporters when he told the party president to apologise for implicitly reinstating two Youth leaders who were sacked during the movement's annual general meeting.

Both the Youth leaders, who are aligned to Ling, were thrown out after a 'chair-throwing' fracas at the meeting. However, Ling's stand was that pending an investigation into the incident, both Youth leaders were to stay put in their positions.

Now the hypothesis making the rounds is that Ong would be a casualty in the eventuality Ling and Lim reach a compromise.

The story line, say sources, is that party vice-president Datuk Chua Jui Meng, who is aligned to Lim, will be offered the party deputy presidency but minus his ministership. Datuk Chan Kong Choy, a backbone in the Lim faction, will be offered Chua's Health Minister's post.

Another Lim supporter, Datuk Fu Ah Kiow, will move up the ladder from Parliamentary Secretary to Deputy Minister. But the sources warn that Ling could be overplaying his card if he tries to force Cabinet changes, which are the prerogative of the Prime Minister.

Although all this are speculation, it is said that perception often becomes reality. If that indeed happens, Ong could be the biggest loser. Incidentally, both Chan and Fu are from Pahang, Lim's home state. Chua is from Johor while Ong is from Selangor.

In recent months, Barisan Nasional component party leaders have voiced their wish for a united MCA, especially when Umno is facing intense competition from PAS. Mathias Chang, the political secretary on Chinese affairs to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, recently met the Lim faction to explore a possible compromise. It is learnt that the message he received was that the olive branch should come from Ling.

According to a division head, the Lim faction, despite being a force to

be reckoned with, has not crystallised into a unified action group. He claims the faction is divided into three groups, something which the opponents are exploiting.

The division head says Lim leads the major force, followed by Ong and Chua. Lim's proteges are Chan and Fu. With the fiery Chan being the backbone of the Lim faction, sources say it does not come as a surprise that Ling's supporters are trying to woo him over.

Chan, according to a party official aligned to Lim, is in a difficult position. He cannot decline a full ministership but, at the same time, is fearful that should he accept any compromise deal, he would be 'boxed up' in the top leadership and suffer the fate of Lee (Kim Sai).

In that case in 1990, Lee agreed to a compromise in his challenge against Ling and a few years later found himself the lone opposition voice at the MCA top leadership. All his supporters fell out.

'Chan is fearful of a similar fate,' says the official.

The alleged incohesiveness of the Lim faction and talks of compromise are unnerving division leaders. At least one division leader in Selangor has left the Lim camp for Ling's.

'The division heads are soldiers in the political battle. If there is a compromise, they are hurt most,' says a central committee member. 'The sacking of Chua as Kedah MCA leader sparked off another crisis in the party akin to that caused by the Nanyang issue. But it is slowly fizzling out, causing jitters among the lower-level supporters.'

The central committee member says it is also perplexing to note that Chan (Kong Choy) has kept a low profile while Ong is facing a barrage of criticism from fellow Youth leaders.

The Lim faction is a formidable force in the MCA. It has a deputy president, two elected vice-presidents, the Youth head, the deputy Wanita chief and a few central committee members.

The MCA elections are to be held in the middle of next year. The challenge for the Lim faction is not only to dispel talks of incohesiveness but also to provide more concrete evidence of its united stand.

As for the Ling faction, from a seemingly hopeless position a few months ago, it is gaining momentum in getting members to forget the Nanyang issue. Some officials say it is no coincidence that the party president is hurrying to set up the University Tunku Abdul Rahman (Utar). The issue has won Ling many points among fence-sitters.

In such a scenario, the only ones to lose out would be unaffiliated candidates such as Ong. But being the fighter he is, he is obviously prepared to face it all.

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