

TEAMWORK: MCA President Ling Liong Sik (left) with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad

MALAYSIA

Together

The prime minister bolsters his political standing by overseeing a truce between key allies

By S. Jayasankaran/KUALA LUMPUR

PRIME MINISTER Mahathir Mohamad has moved to defuse a leadership struggle within his coalition's second-largest party, the Malaysian Chinese Association, or MCA. His intervention pre-empted a potentially divisive party election and demonstrated his domination of the ruling 15-party National Front coalition.

Healing the rift could set the stage for a general election as early as next year. That may have been Mahathir's goal: The Chinese vote has emerged as a crucial swing factor for Mahathir in recent years amid divided ethnic Malay support for his dominant United Malays National Organization following the ouster of Deputy Premier Anwar Ibrahim.

Moreover, the prime minister's response to the September 11 attacks in the United States—to take advantage of non-Malay public concern about terrorism and intensify a crackdown on perceived Islamic extremism—has set public opinion against Umno's main rival, the opposition Islamic Party, and bolstered Chinese support for the National Front. Mahathir appears anxious to keep it that way, after telling MCA leaders in early April that the party was “the only pimple” on the National Front's face, according to party officials.

Mahathir's got his way: On April 23, MCA president Ling Liong Sik shook hands with his deputy and rival Lim Ah Lek, and read from a Mahathir script, saying that there would be no contests in the party for three years and the status quo would prevail. If all goes as planned, no MCA candidate for the

general election will be undermined by the opposing faction.

Ling and Lim's feud became public last June after the party's bid for *Nanyang Siang Pao*, a relatively independent Chinese newspaper. Lim, the MCA deputy president, opposed the purchase, fearing, among other things, that once the newspaper came under MCA control it would reflect Ling's views. But Ling won that round when the party voted to buy the paper.

Then things turned nasty. Both sides began recruiting new members to support them in party polls scheduled for June this year. The first stage should have been late-April divisional elections to choose 2,887 new delegates to the June assembly, which would choose party leaders, from the president down.

But Lim's team alleged that Ling's men had created 140,000 “phantom” members to make sure the divisional delegates chosen were stacked in his favour. Lim's team vowed to hold an extraordinary general assembly to stop the April elections and insist on independent verification of the new members. Ling dismissed the allegations, declared that the assembly was illegal, and vowed to go on with the elections. Had the elections proceeded, Lim's men would have been wiped out and the party divided.

Enter Mahathir. According to party insiders, one week before an April 16 trip to the Middle East Mahathir met with Lim and his lieutenants and insisted that before he intervened, “whatever peace formula I come up with” must be followed. They agreed. The premier subsequently got the agreement of Ling's side as well.

According to the party insiders, the original proposal called for the extraordinary assembly to be cancelled but divisional elections to proceed. At a later stage, both Ling and Lim were to step down and elections held in which whoever lost the challenge for the presidency would become the deputy.

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Subsequently, Mahathir changed his mind, fearing that in the absence of a resolution the feud would grow out of control, according to the party insiders. From the Middle East, he called for the elections to be postponed. He returned on April 22 and the resolution was announced the next day.

The agreement says nothing about both MCA leaders' retirement, but the insiders insist that it is on the cards. In the event, the premier bought three years of temporary unity ahead of general elections.

But the rancour within the MCA isn't over. “There will be a lot of infighting behind the scenes,” says political analyst James Wong. “It's not going to go away.” That may no longer be a problem for Mahathir, who is now 78 years old. Most analysts think that the next general election will be his last. ■