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A trouble-plagued year for MCA

Chow Kum Hor

THE year 2002, long marked in the diaries of aspiring MCA leaders as a critical election year, started with the party still reeling from one of its worst crises in history.

With the split into Team A, Team B factions, the previous year's controversy involving the takeover of Nanyang, and the fracas at the Youth annual general meeting, complete with threats and chair throwing, have seen the party divided as never before.

Ironically, 2002 started with both factions setting aside their "differences" for the Jan 19 Indera Kayangan by-election contested by the party's Perlis Wanita head, Oui Ah Lan.

Both factions campaigned tirelessly - albeit in groups marked by factional affiliation - leading to Oui's handsome electoral victory.

Even before the posters were taken down in Indera Kayangan, Team A, led by party president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, and the deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek-headed Team B, were back in election mode again - this time for party elections.

The MCA elections, fixed over three months, started with the branch polls in March, but unfolding events would show the divisional, State and national-level "elections" were at best, a formality, and in some cases a farce.

It all started with the Team B faction alleging the existence of thousands of "phantom members" on the party's membership list.

With Team A controlling the party machinery, it was alleged that non-existent names, non-Chinese and the dead were found on the party's membership roll.

Team A, saying it was determined to set the record straight, approached Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for help. Team B claimed that it was they who pressured Team A to sort out the dubious membership list.

This probably marked the beginning of seeking external help, advice, coercion and even pressure that shaped much of the course of the party in 2002.

Three compact discs containing names of 9,121 new MCA members were crossed checked with the National Registration Department's database.

Not unexpectedly, Team B disputed Team A's contention that the vetted membership list was "clean".

The dissenting faction, however, came up with evidence of purported forgery and cheating involving party membership. However, no details were revealed.

From then on, with the branch elections already concluded, it was a fight against time as both groups tried to outmanoeuvre each other with rivalry building up to unprecedented intensity since the 20-month crisis started.

With the possibility of an extraordinary general meeting being convened that would severely affect MCA's reputation, the Barisan Nasional leadership resorted to the unconventional but necessary step - intervention and mediation.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is BN chairman, assisted by Abdullah and two prominent businessmen, held talks with both sides.

Sometimes, the meetings dragged on until the wee hours of the morning,

veiled in secrecy and intrigue.

For those not aware of the clandestine meetings, the only hint was that a peace formula - later known as the MCA peace plan - was being drawn up.

On April 22 after a Team A delegation met Dr Mahathir, Dr Ling announced at a Press conference that the nationwide divisional nominations on that day had been called off.

The announcement, at 6pm, came two hours into the nominations which were scheduled to end at 8pm.

The following day, details of the peace plan were announced. The much publicised handshake between Dr Ling and Lim brought much hope.

Under the peace formula, all office-bearers from divisional level upwards, would be retained in the elections. With no contest, some semblance of stability returned, as party leaders went out of the way to convince their supporters to support a single list of office-bearers.

In one division where contenders failed to come to a consensus, seven vice-heads were named, although the MCA constitution only provided for four.

As expected, the truce did not last long as the Team B-dominated disciplinary board was replaced with five controversial veteran party leaders.

The uncannily-timed return of one-time Dr Ling-confidante and fugitive businessman Datuk Soh Chee Wen added to the intrigue.

After a protracted internal crisis, MCA's external problems filled the newspapers, again for all the wrong reasons.

Once more MCA leaders were confronted with outside elements as the party's ties with its BN component colleagues were put to the test.

First, it was the Government's proposal to use English to teach Science and Mathematics in national-type Chinese primary schools.

After much feet-dragging, MCA finally decided to oppose the proposal - a stand although welcomed by Chinese educationists, was hotly opposed by Umno.

Hardly had MCA recovered from this language issue with its senior BN partner, when it was confronted by another issue, this time concerning its two Assembly members in Penang.

Umno, Gerakan and the Peoples' Progressive Party criticised MCA when the two Assembly members abstained in an Opposition motion in the Penang Legislative Assembly on Nov 21.

The Umno supreme council even called for the sacking of the duo, a decision described by DAP national chairman Lim Kit Siang as "putting a gun to MCA's head". The supreme council then decided to leave the matter to the BN leadership.

As a senior leader put it, MCA's internal problems had exposed the party's weaknesses, bringing into question its effectiveness in handling external challenges, whether within or outside the BN.

Trials and tribulations are what it takes for an organisation to emerge stronger and wiser and with the Chinese Year of the Horse drawing to a close, there is little time left for MCA to rise above its problems. At least in this lunar year.