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All the ingredients that go into the making of political heroes or martyrs

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HEROES are made not born, or so the saying goes.

In Penang, the MCA duo who chose to abstain in the motion tabled by a DAP assemblyman at the State Legislative Assembly recently, have all the makings of becoming heroes, if not political martyrs.

As it is right now, amid threats of being expelled, the duo - Lim Boo Chang (Datuk Keramat) and Tan Cheng Liang (Jawi) - are getting support from numerous quarters.

They had, on the last day of the State Legislative Assembly meeting on Nov 21, abstained instead of rejecting a motion tabled by the Opposition to defer the proposed construction of the RM1.02 billion Penang Outer Ring Road (PORR).

Some members of the public had written to support their stand to abstain, saying it was time the nation had representatives who were not mere yes-men or in the case of Tan, yes-woman.

Others view them as having the moral courage to vote according to their conscience and not blindly toeing party line.

Meanwhile, Barisan Nasional leaders from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to component party president such as Gerakan's president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, had called for disciplinary action, including expulsion.

Dr Mahathir was very scathing in his comments and described their action as a very serious thing.

On voting by conscience, Dr Mahathir remarked:

"If everybody votes on conscience, there would not be any party.

"When they want to enter or contest, they ask for support from the party. After they have won they want to act independently. But did they think they could win without the support from the party?"

At this stage, BN is expecting the MCA to expel them yet the latter has shown reluctance.

On the quiet, certain MCA leaders have tried to link the situation with Umno's own inability to discipline its Assemblymen when they abstained instead of opposing the Pasled Terengganu Government's Syariah Bill which included the hudud, when it was tabled in the State Assembly in July last year.

The sentiment is echoed by DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang.

In fact, he even went a step further, challenging the MCA leadership to use the case of the Terengganu Umno Assemblymen as a point of argument to put a stop to demands for disciplinary action against Tan and Lim.

An Umno leader argued that the Terengganu case only involved Umno Assemblymen and their action had no implications on MCA, Gerakan or MIC.

"Furthermore, there was no precouncil discussion where the Umno Assemblymen would have had an opportunity to state their views.

"However, for the MCA duo, they were present during the pre-council and why didn't they have a conscience then? Are they saying that they developed the conscience only when they were at the assembly?"

"For the DAP to try to take advantage of the situation by bringing the Terengganu Bill issue, surely they are the least qualified to talk about it.

"Wasn't the DAP an ally of Pas in the 1999 general election and had a direct hand in ensuring the latter get into power and it is this power which allowed Pas to proceed with the hudud laws?"

While the issue can truly get sidetracked, the matter that truly needs to be asked is whether the duo had breached party discipline and whether they should be "forgiven" for voting by their conscience.

A political observer views it very simply:

"If conscience is the capital used by the duo, obviously they have none. In the first place, under our democratic system, once the party whip had been taken out, all members are expected to toe the line.

"If, any member had any misgiving, it should have been aired during the pre-council or the other avenues available. On that score, the MCA representatives have obviously erred and disciplinary action must be effected on them."

Talking about avenues, there is obviously something amiss in the whole episode.

Three other MCA Assemblymen - Exco member Datuk Koay Kar Huah of Bukit Gelugor, Lye Siew Weng (Air Itam) and Loo Ah Dee (Sungai Puyu) - had opposed the motion tabled by the DAP.

To make the matter more interesting is the fact that neither Lim's nor Tan's constituency is affected by the PORR project.

Ironically Koay's and Lye's seats are affected and yet, they observed the whip when voting.

In fact, if the MCA duo who abstained were troubled by their conscience, then obviously, Koay and Lye whose constituencies were directly affected lacked such values.

It is quite intriguing that such a situation has now been viewed as serving a bigger agenda and political observers believed it was an attempt to undermine the Penang BN leadership under Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, who is from Gerakan.

To add weightage to the views is the fact that Lim, of Datuk Keramat, won on a Gerakan ticket in the 1999 general election and decided with another Gerakan candidate, Lim Chien Aun ( Bayan Lepas), to join MCA.

Their crossover to MCA changed the political equation, giving their new party a certain degree of legitimacy to demand the chief ministership from Gerakan.

Now that it involves Lim again and the manner the MCA leadership seems to be reluctant to emulate what Gerakan did in 1996 which was to expel its pro-tem Sabah chairman Kong Hong Ming and appointed Assemblyman Jahid Jahim for similar offences in the Sabah assembly, raises much question.

The implications are quite extensive as, public perceptions are now shaped against the PORR.

In short, if the Penang BN cannot even convince their own Assemblymen, forget about convincing the rest of the citizenry.

On that score, the duo will be made into heroes. But lest they forget, there is another saying: the only good heroes are the ones dead.