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Case of the errant MCA duo seems like a recurring bad dream for BN

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THE case of the two errant MCA Assemblymen seems to be like a recurring bad dream.

At least, that is how a Barisan Nasional Youth leader sees it.

Indeed, if he thought he would be waking up to look forward to a beautiful day after the MCA presidential council made its decision on Monday, he guessed wrong.

The decision by the council to suspend the duo - Lim Boo Chang (BN-Datuk Keramat) and Tan Cheng Liang (BN-Jawi) - indefinitely, only seems to prolong the nightmare.

As it is, Gerakan leaders have described the decision as a farce while some Umno leaders are wondering what "indefinitely" means.

The crux of the matter is actually very simple. It is the manner and reaction to the matter that has led to the whole thing becoming nightmarish.

The chronology of events started when Lim and Tan decided to abstain from voting against an Opposition motion seeking to defer the Penang Outer Ring Road (PORR) project in the State Legislative Assembly on Nov 21.

The action ruffled numerous feathers especially Gerakan, which is leading Penang on behalf of the BN as well as Umno, the senior partner in the coalition. Both parties called for expulsion as the two were viewed as having breached BN discipline.

Their arguments were simple - they had been briefed by Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon during a pre-council meeting on how they should vote and that the BN whip is on, meaning that all BN representatives must vote in one voice.

To them also, there was a precedent in Sabah in 1996 in which two Gerakan Assemblymen Kong Hong Ming and Jahid Jahim were expelled for similar offences.

The matter would have ended there and then if the MCA leadership had acted likewise.

However, the MCA leadership decided to drag the issue, some arguing that they had acted according to their conscience and reacting to the expectations of their constituents.

This led to Koh questioning the basis on which the conscience had come about to the two when their constituencies were not affected by the PORR project.

Furthermore, Koh pointed out that several other MCA Assemblymen whose constituencies were affected by the project were voting consistently with the coalition.

Then Umno came into the picture when party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, after chairing its supreme council, said the party was of the opinion that the two MCA Assemblymen should be sacked.

He also said that the BN could take the necessary action against Lim and Tan.

The MCA presidential council chose to pass the case to its disciplinary board which in turn decided to seek clarification from Koh on the absence of eight BN Assemblymen during the Nov 21 incident.

The action sparked another round of indignation, with Koh and other Gerakan leaders arguing that the case was about the duo abstaining and not about the absence of other BN Assemblymen.

Amid all these, MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik decided to

speak out and said that the BN should not get involved in the disciplining of the two as the coalition had no power to do so.

Reacting to this, Dr Mahathir came out with a strong reminder for the MCA, that the BN might not have any power to discipline individual members of its components, but it did have the power to decide which party belonged to the coalition.

Against this backdrop, MCA leaders were insinuating that Umno was practising double-standards.

While no one was prepared to come out openly, the reverberations were loud enough to be picked up in which the party was questioning why Umno did not expel its own Assemblymen in Terengganu who had abstained during the tabling of the Pasled State Government hudud Bill in the State Assembly.

To them, the four Umno Assemblymen had acted against the party and BN stand which opposed the Terengganu laws which had been pointed out to be as much of a "crime" as what the MCA duo had committed, but which had been ignored.

But several Umno leaders pointed out that although the four had abstained, their "crime" was committed without affecting the BN.

"Firstly, they were in the Opposition and the State Government was not under BN. Secondly, they are not subjected to the BN whip as they are supposed to come up collectively with their own devices in dealing with affairs in the State.

"The Federal BN cannot impose its whip on their State Assemblymen and there is no State BN whip. If there is any kind of whip, it is among themselves and they had chosen to abstain collectively.

"Finally, their action cannot bring about the downfall of a BN State Government when Terengganu is ruled by Pas," one Umno leader said.

It is, however, not the same with Assemblymen in BN-led states.

"Let's say it was an MCA-ruled state. What if Gerakan and Umno Assemblymen decided to vote not according to what had been agreed in a pre-council meeting and voted according to their so-called conscience. It could lead to the downfall of the MCA-led Government. That is the significance of the action of the two errant MCA Assemblymen," said an observer.

That established, the action of Dr Ling to question the power of the BN, attempts by some MCA leaders to drag in actions of Umno Assemblymen in Terengganu and the MCA disciplinary board's letter to Koh, only serve to ensure that the party loses more goodwill from the coalition leaders.

Now it has decided to announce the indefinite suspension of the two Assemblymen which had indeed gone against the suggestion by Dr Mahathir who is, apart from being the Umno president, the BN chairman.

"MCA, instead of being enraged, embarrassed and angry with the action of the two, had been dragging their feet and trying to undermine Umno and Gerakan," said another senior Umno leader.

Now BN has to deal with the indefinite suspension, which to the leaders other than from MCA, is unclear and not reflecting sincerity.

"The least the MCA could have done was to specify the time-frame of their suspension and that the two will not be renominated as candidates for the next general election.

"Furthermore, the MCA should inform the BN chairman first of its decision. Much as Dr Ling may feel that the BN had no power to get involved in disciplinary matters of its members, he should at least realise that it is the BN chairman who decides and signs the letter of candidacy of who gets to contest under the coalition's banner," said an observer.

On this, a mid-level MCA leader shared her displeasure over the stance

and the manner in which the party handled the case.

"I believe the time has come for BN to review its constitution to ensure that elected representatives who contested under the coalition's banner can be disciplined and not be left only to the discretion of the component parties.

"What we saw is truly a mockery to the cooperation in BN. When it comes to winning election, it is a collective effort and contribution.

"However, when a member of a component party misbehaves, opinions of partners are not taken into consideration. Punishment taken is not only inadequate but also an insult to the component partners who are equally, if not more affected, by the indiscipline," she said.

The whole issue may come to pass and would be forgotten over time. However, it is clear, based on the reactions of some of the leaders of component partners, that the episode had eroded quite a lot of goodwill they had for the MCA.

They will not lose sleep over it. But it would be a recurring bad dream.