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`Formality elections' to endorse MCA CC members for another three-year

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MONTHS ago, the battle cry was sounded and strategies devised for the final showdown tomorrow when MCA central delegates converge following a protracted split in the party. But a war will not take place.

Instead, the 2,805 delegates will go through what has been dubbed a "formality election" by endorsing the 1999-2002 central committee members for another three-year term.

Status quo for the party's office-bearers at the divisional, State and national levels is part of the MCA peace plan. It works on the premise that no vacancies means no jostling for posts and hence no reason to fight.

Vacancies, especially in the Youth movement, where membership is restricted to 45 and below, should be filled through negotiations.

Before the peace accord, which was made public on April 23, Team A and Team B leaders were at each other's throats.

Team A refers to the faction led by president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik while Team B was headed by deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek.

At the height of the crisis, dissent and dissatisfaction were displayed by flying chairs, circulating malicious VCDs and even threats of bodily harm against political opponents.

"Some semblance of sanity has returned to the party because of the peace plan. I cannot imagine what would become of the MCA if the fighting had dragged on," said a former MCA MP.

The peace plan was originally drawn up by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is also Barisan Nasional chairman but was implemented with some amendments by the MCA central committee.

With so much at stake, especially for aspirants to party posts, the peace accord also has its share of critics.

Firstly, the elections steering committee, determined to ensure a single list of office-bearers, struck out all nominations by challengers - a move deemed unconstitutional.

"Extraordinary times called for extraordinary political solutions," steering committee chairman Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh said.

Incidentally, Dr Ling had earlier rejected a proposal to postpone the party polls to after the next general election because it was, well, against the party constitution.

In fact, Dr Ling's political secretary and the private secretary to Youth head Datuk Ong Tee Keat, were nominated for posts in the Youth movement and this resulted in contests.

This has given rise to criticisms that if top party leaders could not even stop their aides from contesting, grassroots leaders could not be blamed for not abiding by the peace plan.

The unhappiness is understandable. For the aspirants, large sums of money has been spent on potential delegates to woo for support, ranging from holding sumptuous dinners to overseas trips.

With the no-contest ruling, the "investment" will not be recouped.

For Team A, with the party machinery at its disposal, their hopes of crushing Team B in the elections were shattered. For the grassroots, the peace plan had denied them of their democratic right to vote and contest.

This unhappiness has been manifested in several ways. In the Kapar divisional election, challenger Khoh Siew Kim brought his own ballot papers and "defeated" the incumbent chairman.

Of the 310 delegates who attended the meeting, 226 voted for Khoh, who incidentally is also the former private secretary to Ting.

In Muar, dissatisfied members burnt the party constitution during the divisional meeting while the Selangor Youth assembly saw a 40-minute shouting melee and flying mineral water bottles.

A MCA central committee member said at best, the peace plan had given some breathing space to the warring factions and allowed them to heal the wounds. "What happens next is anybody's guess, especially since Team B has bought some much-needed time."

A Selangor MCA assemblyman disagreed. He said had it not been for the peace plan, the situation could have been much worse and the cooling-off period had allowed reason to prevail.

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