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## Getting a grip

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THE issue of the reintroduction of English as the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics in schools is yet to be fully resolved. It may yet provoke more controversies.

Despite the MCA and other Chinese-based Barisan Nasional (BN) component parties grudgingly accepting a compromised version of the policy, the Chinese opposition remains very much alive.

At least two major Chinese organisations have openly opposed the compromised solution. This, in turn, attracted angry response from Umno and Malay-based organisations.

The war of words climaxed in the call to arrest, under the Internal Security Act (ISA), those allegedly inciting communal feelings over the issue.

For now, the language debate has been given a breather. Both sides are waiting for details of the policy before making the next move.

They could have also been taken aback by the call to use the ISA, which, given the developments in recent months, cannot be considered a mere threat.

With the Government having detained scores of people suspected of being members of the militant Muslim movement under the act in the last one year, the ISA spectre is more than real.

Following the compromise, the fear that the BN consensus-building mechanism might be falling apart was abated.

But that did not last very long. The MCA again drew the spotlight when two of its Penang State Assembly members - Lim Boo Chang (Datuk Keramat) and Tan Cheng Liang (Jawi) - failed to vote with the BN in opposing a DAP motion in the assembly. The seriousness of their action was made plainly clear when the MCA-controlled Star newspaper itself described it as unprecedented.

The DAP had called for the RM1-billion Penang Outer Ring Road project to be deferred.

Although their defiance was clearly directed at the Gerakan, which is the lead member of the state government, it is Umno that seems to think that the MCA duo have gone a bit too far and that something drastic has to be done.

At the meeting of its Supreme Council on Nov 29, chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Umno demanded that the wayward representatives be sacked. 'As far as Umno is concerned, we want them sacked,' Dr Mahathir told the Press after the meeting.

There has been rising concern among a vast majority of Umno members that the MCA and other Chinese-based parties of the BN are taking the consensus-building mechanism of the coalition for granted.

Hidden agenda ...

The MCA's stance after the 1999 general elections, in which it was credited with defending the BN against the Opposition's onslaught, has caused the displeasure of an increasing number of Umno members and raised some very disturbing questions about the leading Chinese party.

Is the MCA going overboard in demanding payback from the BN, in particular from Umno, for delivering the coalition's two-thirds majority in the elections?

The Umno-led Government has clearly made a number of important concessions, which a few years ago was unthinkable, particularly the

setting up of the MCA-sponsored Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Has the MCA gone overboard in making these demands by deliberately challenging the consensus politics of the BN?

The party has clearly been wavering on the language issue, supporting it at one time and opposing at another.

Has the MCA, after undergoing months of internal strife that pitched its long-serving President Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik with his deputy Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek, lost the ability to control its own members?

Or is there a hidden agenda like regaining Penang, which it lost to the Gerakan - then an Opposition party - in the 1969 general elections?

The MCA has never really accepted the authority of Gerakan in the state. It has been grudgingly playing the role of a junior partner merely because of the status quo imposed by the BN.

As the date for the general elections draws closer, the MCA could be building a case for taking over the lead role in Penang or at least to get more seats to contest in the enlarged state assembly.

Whatever the MCA's motive, the action of its two Penang State Assembly members is a direct challenge to the consensus politics of the BN. Unless an acceptable solution is found, the incident will undermine the party and the BN at the coming polls.

It is in this light that Umno's tough demand should be viewed. The MCA does not appear to have too many options this time around. If it fails to act, then the privilege given to it by the BN will be taken away.

In the final analysis, a move that undermines the BN consensus-building mechanism will be detrimental to the coalition while improving the chances of the Opposition in the coming elections.

On its part, Umno cannot look at the MCA's determined fight on behalf of the Chinese merely as a threat to its own interest and be confronted with raw political muscle.

It has to look at its own policies and programmes as the principal representative of the Malays and other Bumiputeras. The party cannot hope to match the MCA and other non-Malay parties merely on the strength of words and representation in the Parliament and state assemblies.

But the BN will be doing justice to the MCA duo and the people if it makes no attempt at explaining why nine BN representatives, including four from the MCA, were not in the assembly when the vote on the DAP motion was being taken. Also not in the assembly were two Gerakan and three Umno representatives. One of the Umno assemblyman was away on umrah in Mecca. Why were they absent when voting on a major issue was being carried out?

It raises questions on their actual stand on the matter and the effectiveness of the BN whip. Newspaper reports quoted some of them as citing reasons such as the House being too cold and not being informed of the voting.