

01/12/2002

MCA Assemblymen's action becomes national issue

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THE MCA seems to be in the middle of a storm that is threatening to undermine the delicate thread of co-operation among Barisan Nasional parties in Penang.

The issue has assumed national importance for the simple fact that this is probably the first time that BN elected representatives have gone against the official stand of the coalition in a State legislative assembly.

The Bahasa Malaysia newspapers highlighted the issue when the fact came to light that on Nov 21 Tan Cheng Liang (Jawi) and Lim Boo Chang (Datuk Keramat) abstained during a vote at the Penang State Assembly on a DAP motion calling for the deferment of the controversial RM1.02 billion Penang Outer Ring Road project.

Berita Harian came out strongly in an editorial earlier in the week, saying that Tan was on the wrong track and seemed to be playing into the hands of the DAP.

More so, it added, because the Jawi State Assemblyman was not representing her constituents when she claimed that she was responding to the 30,000 signatures against the project.

This was because the project was not within her constituency, Berita Harian added.

What was more puzzling to the newspaper was that elected representatives within whose constituencies the PORR projects ran did not protest, a fact that gave currency to the popular belief that Tan and Lim were opposing the project for the sake of opposing.

This has to be seen in the context of the fractious relationship between the two BN component parties dating back to the late 1960s.

The relationship has worsened over time with the MCA keen to take over the helm from the Gerakan which has been maintaining a tenuous hold over the Chief Minister's post largely due to the sufferance of State and national Umno leaders.

For the record, the MCA has 11 elected representatives in the house as opposed to eight for the Gerakan and 10 for Umno. The MIC, Pas, Keadilan and DAP have one representative each.

Utusan Malaysia took a swipe at the duo yesterday with its columnist Awang Sulung saying that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad wanted the MCA to sack them.

According to the daily column Bisik Bisik, the issue was a test of the politics of MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, himself under pressure within the party from his deputy Datuk Lim Ah Lek.

The column voiced the feelings of many who felt a "drama" was being staged, unsuccessfully from the look of things, as part of a larger scheme to open the door for the MCA to wrest the Chief Minister's post.

"It looks as if the MCA will wash its hands by handing over the matter to the BN for a decision. If this happens, it will be very clear that the MCA leadership has no backbone anymore," he added.

The MCA senior leadership was, however, singing another tune as was evident in the words of party secretary-general Datuk Seri Dr Ting Chew Peh who told Sin Chew Daily last Thursday that he hoped Tan and Lim would not be expelled by the party.

In the same breath, he told the newspaper that it was an accepted practice in Malaysia for elected representatives to adhere to the party

stand on issues of common interest and not act according to their their conscience.

This, he said, did not preclude the fact that those who had opposed the DAP motion held individual, and possibly contradictory, positions.

A China Press report last Sunday said the time had come for the BN to review the team spirit that was usually lauded by most in the light of the Penang incident.

A Nanyang Siang Pau news analysis last Saturday advised the BN to find the common denominator in implementing projects which it felt should only be done after taking into account the feelings of the people.

International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz was at the centre of a controversy last week when she claimed that Australian authorities had treated her like a terrorist during her visit to the country for a World Trade Organisation meeting two weeks ago.

The Bahasa Malaysia media carried her account of how the authorities repeatedly told her that they would use sniffer dogs on her baggage and her protests.

She was particularly incensed by the fact that some of the delegates attending the meeting were not subjected to such checks.

The Tamil newspapers took a close look at the death by suicide of M. Manimaran, 35, his wife V. Leela, 27, and their only son Devanraj, four, by paraquat poisoning last Monday.

The Tamil Nesan, like all newspapers nationwide, reported that the couple poisoned themselves and their child after being unable to handle the harassment of the loan sharks.

Malaysia Nanban, in an editorial, said the Government had yet to take effective action to come down hard on loan sharks.