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MCA needs to regain Chinese support fast

Chow Kum Hor

MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik looked unusually restless, drumming his fingers on the table as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad fielded questions from reporters after the Barisan Nasional supreme council meeting on Wednesday.

Still, Dr Ling, who is also Transport Minister, made time for reporters who had questions for him after the media conference.

Dr Ling's aides said the Jan 19 Indera Kayangan by-election had taken a great physical toll on the doctor-turned-politician who could do with a well-deserved rest.

In the by-election, MCA's Ooi Ah Lan won with a landslide 2,592 votes majority against Parti Keadilan Nasional's Khoo Yang Chong.

But rest is the last thing Dr Ling's enemies - from within and outside the party - are giving him.

The latest assault came in the form of accusations that more Chinese had voted for Parti Keadilan Nasional in the by-election.

The two major Chinese-dominated voting districts in the Indera Kayangan constituency are Pekan Lama Kangar with about 85 per cent Chinese voters and Pekan Baru Kangar (about 71 per cent).

Both saw Keadilan securing higher votes compared to the 1999 general election. In Pekan Lama Kangar, Keadilan's votes increased by 40 votes and in Pekan Baru Kangar by 68 votes.

One Keadilan leader went so far as to claim his party garnered 620 Chinese votes in the by-election compared to 152 in 1999.

Even DAP national chairman Lim Kit Siang described as "ridiculous" Keadilan's so-called preliminary findings of the voting trend. Mathematically, Keadilan's analysis did not even add up.

However, MCA Pasir Pinji assemblyman Chan Kam, who had asked Dr Ling to resign last year, issued a more detailed estimate of the declining Chinese votes for MCA.

But beyond Indera Kayangan, MCA critics point out that there are many instances which indicate the party has lost some ground among the Chinese.

Days before the by-election, Chinese community leaders held a closed-door dialogue with Dr Mahathir to discuss issues relating to the community.

The delegation included seven representatives from the main Chinese clans in the country as well as leaders from the Federation of Chinese Associations (Hua Zhong) and the Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The meeting, unprecedented in history, gave the impression that the Chinese community would rather highlight its plight directly to the Prime Minister rather than through the embattled MCA.

"It is better for us to go to Dr Mahathir directly than through the MCA. We can convey our message more directly," Hua Zhong president Tan Sri Chong Chin Shoong said when contacted.

Chong was part of the delegation which met with the Prime Minister.

Last month, a Winter Solstice Festival celebration, held in Bukit Jalil, saw about 15,000 people attending, including Dr Mahathir as well as key MCA and Gerakan leaders.

The do was organised under the auspices of businessman Tan Sri Lee Kim Yew.

"MCA cannot even hold a large-scale Chinese festival celebration, let

alone attract crowds by the tens of thousands.

"It reflects on the party," a Team B MCA leader said.

Dissident party members argued that the appointment of two Chinese aides to Dr Mahathir last year was further proof that the Government had lost trust in MCA in defending the community's interests.

Lawyer Matthias Chang was made Dr Mahathir's political secretary and newspaper editor Cheng Khee Chien as Press secretary. Not since Michael Chen (now Datuk) was appointed Tun Razak's Parliamentary Secretary had a Prime Minister had such a direct access to Chinese advisers.

"Is MCA not doing its job of fighting for the Chinese in the Government?"

"Or has Dr Mahathir lost faith in the party to help the Chinese?" the Team B member asked.

The sceptics cannot be blamed for belittling MCA's role as the so-called guardian of Chinese interests in the ruling coalition.

Last May, MCA turned a deaf ear to the protests of the Chinese community when the party went ahead and took over Chinese dailies Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press.

In handling the relocation of SJK (C) Damansara and Vision School issues, the party also took a beating from the Opposition.

Even the high-level discussions between Umno Youth and Suqiu on the latter's appeals, purportedly for the benefit of the non-Malays, was not mediated by MCA leaders.

The mediators were Gerakan leaders, including its deputy president Datuk Kerk Choo Ting.

The internal MCA leadership tussle in the party did not help.

The Team A-Team B split - arguably the worst in history - only made it more difficult for MCA to concentrate on the community's concerns.

But not all are sceptical over MCA's role in safeguarding the Chinese community's interests. Chen, now Dewan Negara president, questioned how the Opposition arrived at the conclusion that the Chinese votes in Indera Kayangan had gone down for BN.

"The voting is supposed to be secret anyway. I don't think more Chinese voted for the Opposition," said Chen, a former MCA deputy president, who spent two days campaigning in Indera Kayangan.

Granted the outcome in Indera Kayangan is by no means representative of the Chinese electorate's sentiments nationwide.

Besides, by-elections, based on experience, generally tend to favour the Opposition - especially if no change of government is necessary - whatever the outcome of the polls.

As for the meeting between Dr Mahathir and the Chinese community leaders, Chen said: "These people have shown support for the Prime Minister. I think they don't draw a distinction between support for Dr Mahathir and support for MCA. The party is also part of the ruling coalition."

Hua Zhong's Chong conceded that Chinese-based non-governmental organisations still had to turn to MCA and Gerakan for support and assistance.

"They are in the Government. We still need them," he said.

With the fear of Islamic extremism following the Sept 11 tragedy working in BN's favour, the Chinese now will be more cautious before venting their anger at the Government by voting for the Pas-led Opposition front.

"You think the Chinese voters will vote in Pas leaders? The Chinese will continue supporting MCA," a MCA Minister said.

A Selangor MCA branch chairman however expressed reservation.

The DAP, he pointed out, had left the Opposition coalition due to disagreement with Pas over the Islamic State issue.

This leaves the DAP as the best party to absorb, in terms of votes, whatever frustration the Chinese would have with the MCA.

"In future, it can be a case of the people voting for BN but not MCA," said the branch chairman.

The DAP, after all, is usually MCA's opponent in urban Chinese seats during general elections.

All said and done, there is no way to conclusively determine how much support the Chinese electorate has for the MCA until the next general election, due in 2004, although there were predictions there could be a snap poll.

The inter-play of MCA's track record and the Chinese electorate's fears of Islamic fundamentalism as manifested by the Opposition front, would determine the party's showing in the polls.

Still, it remains to be seen how far MCA will succeed in the next general election to prove its critics wrong.

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