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Questions over leadership succession plan touches a raw nerve in the MCA

Chow Kum Hor

CONSIDERED a taboo topic barely three weeks ago, MCA members are now openly discussing a subject which could potentially derail the party's peace plan - succession in MCA.

It all started with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's announcement of his retirement plan. This led to deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek suggesting that MCA should take a cue from Umno.

Lim also called on party president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik to make public his retirement plan, to ensure a smooth succession in MCA and added he (Lim) was ready to go at anytime.

"Let's not compare apples and oranges. Umno and MCA are very different although we may share many aspirations," MCA vice-president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting said.

Ong, the Housing and Local Government Minister, said although there should be smooth succession in MCA, different parties may have different ways of doing it.

Not all parties, he added, would like to reveal details on how the leadership mantle would be passed on to the second-echelon.

Dr Ling's political secretary Loh Seng Kok echoed similar views. Loh, who is also MCA Youth secretary-general, said the party's peace plan had already been implemented and there was no need to rock the boat.

Under the peace accord, all party office-bearers from the divisional level upwards would, wherever possible, be retained and vacancies would be filled through negotiations.

Bentong MP Liow Tiong Lai, however, disagrees. To ensure a smooth succession in the party, Liow said its details must be made known to members to avert possible in-fighting.

"A good leader plans his retirement and allow the younger people to come up. In MCA, there are a lot of talented people who can take over the leadership," added Liow, who is the other Youth secretary-general.

A senior MCA leader said Dr Mahathir was largely perceived to be unassailable from within Umno and was now at the height of popularity.

"If a man of Dr Mahathir's stature is willing to give up his post, it is only right for lesser souls to follow. The Prime Minister's announcement has only reinforced the perception that old guards in MCA cannot stay forever," he said.

Dr Ling, having led the party for 15 years, is MCA's longest-serving president while his deputy Lim has assumed the post since 1996.

However, Dr Ling's tenure as party president is still shorter compared to Dr Mahathir and MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu with 21 years each and Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik's 22 years.

In any case, a confidante of Dr Ling said it would be highly irresponsible if the MCA president chose to announce his retirement plans now as it would only spark a fresh round of in-fighting within party rank and file.

The party is still reeling from a protracted crisis - arguably the longest and most intense in the party's 53-year history.

Talks of a potential vacancy involving the top posts in the near future - or worse still, naming a successor - could see a return of the enmity and hatred that took place barely two months ago.

"Dr Ling said in 1996 that he wanted to pass the leadership to younger leaders. It has been six years since then. The second-liners have been

groomed and are ready," Liow, Lim's former political secretary, pointed out.

Ong's younger brother Ka Chuan, who is also a Perak Executive Council member, was recently quoted as saying that Lim had said he wanted to leave for the past 10 years but until now, had not.

Historically, the changing of guards in MCA has almost always been a bitter affair. Of the party's six presidents, probably only the transition from Tun Tan Siew Sin to Tan Sri Lee San Choon and Tan Koon Swan to Dr Ling had been relatively smooth.

Liow proposed that top guns in the party sit down and work out a succession plan which would later be proposed to the general assembly for endorsement. This way, the leaders would be seen as having the backing of the assembly and a messy contest could possibly be averted.

But it was the series of "table-talks" between Dr Ling and Lim over succession between late 2000 and early last year that sparked off MCA's crisis.

Presidential supporters accused the deputy president of setting unreasonable conditions for his own retirement, while Lim claimed he was played out by the two mediators. The subsequent formation of Team A and Team B was history.

Unlike Umno, different factors determine MCA's succession process but Dr Mahathir's announcement has highlighted the need for a smooth transition in a party still reeling from the aftermath of one of its worst crises.

\* news@nstp.com.my

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