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Whither the MCA after polls truce?

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WHEN MCA's Oui Ah Lan was announced the winner in the Indera Kayangan by-election last night, it dawned on many party members that another bitter, long-drawn electoral process would take place in two months.

MCA will hold its triennial elections starting with the branches in March, followed by divisions (April), States (May) and central committees (June).

After a turbulent period which saw mudslinging, a chair-throwing incident, a bomb hoax, distribution of VCD layang and poison-pen letters, the elections are set to be the final battlefield for the opposing sides to settle the score.

The Indera Kayangan by-election put the internal conflict on the back-burner.

Team A (led by president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik) and Team B (headed by deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek) decided to declare a "ceasefire".

Both pledged to concentrate on retaining the seat.

A so-called "Team MCA" emerged but it is wishful thinking to see both factions coming to terms during post-Indera Kayangan, considering they even campaigned separately in the run-up to yesterday's polling.

But initial indications showed that the bigger majority win in Indera Kayangan would favour the president in the leadership tussle.

After all, the by-election task force is headed by Dr Ling.

Just as the president's enemies blame the "fish head" for the mess the party is in now, Dr Ling's loyalists insist credit on the electoral victory should go to him.

The victory in Indera Kayangan means that the President's Men can now say the Chinese community still supports MCA.

This is reinforced by the fact that Oui was one of 32 central committee members who supported the takeover of Nanyang Press Holdings Bhd, which publishes Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press.

Since the controversy over the Nanyang takeover, the dissenting Team B faction has been harping on Dr Ling's alleged flagging popularity.

"The Indera Kayangan victory can help Dr Ling debunk the perception that MCA, under his leadership, has lost support from the Chinese community," a branch chairman said.

Whether delegates will buy the argument can only be reflected, to a certain degree, in the respective polling days of the party elections.

Granted, it is difficult to ascertain MCA's clout among the Chinese electorate nationwide going by the results of just one by-election.

But last night's success certainly will make it harder for Team B to prove that Dr Ling no longer enjoys the mandate of the Chinese community.

But within the party itself, another issue looms large - allegations of phantom members and branches.

Party insiders say the problem is like a time bomb set to explode after Indera Kayangan although both teams argue over the magnitude in which the problem would blow over.

It is learnt that at least one party headquarters official was recently interviewed by Bukit Aman over a report lodged concerning this menace.

But until now, save for raising questions over the delay in the formation of branches and the sudden rise in membership, no one has come up with documented evidence of such practices, which both factions are

said to be guilty of.

In this numbers game, Team A has the upper hand with national organising secretary Datuk Ong Ka Chuan, who handled the formation of branches and approval of members, being a staunch supporter of Dr Ling.

Vice-president Datuk Chan Kong Choy last month lamented that the central committee was forced to block-endorse 138,000 members over the past six months.

This amounts to 15 per cent of the party's numbers.

Even in the Wanita section, its deputy, Datin Paduka Dr Tan Yee Kew, had questioned the delay in approving formation of Wanita wings at branch levels and the approval of 30,000 female members over the past two months.

For the Youth wing, the "phantom" problem is no longer confined to the approval of 192 Youth sections at branch levels by the movement's Team A central committee members on Dec 8.

Since then, it is learnt that over 500 applications to set up Youth branches were submitted before Dec 31 to the three-man committee formed to take over the suspended Youth central committee.

It is not known if they have been approved.

"More skeletons will emerge from the closet as the election nears.

"There will be below-the-belt fights and a winner-take-all situation.

"The stakes are high. Some damaging documents will surface," a central committee member said.

One is said to be the first draft of the findings on the Youth fracas by the six MCA veterans.

The document purportedly suggests that Youth chief Datuk Ong Tee Keat be sacked as a member while action be taken against the other Group of Eight dissenting central committee members.

It is also said that only after "external pressure" was put that the party decided to suspend the Youth central committee instead of sacking Tee Keat.

An aide to Dr Ling denied the existence of the document and added that it only showed that Team B, considerably weakened since Nanyang, would resort to "Osama-style tactics to bring the party down with them".

As some predict a no-holds-barred party elections, observers point to the separate meetings between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Team A and Team B leaders, held before the Indera Kayangan polls.

Both sides are tight-lipped over what transpired during the meetings, but speculation is rife that Dr Mahathir, who is also BN chairman, had extracted an "undertaking" by both sides.

It remains to be seen if the meetings would have any effect on MCA in the months to come.

In any case, the months ahead will see party members already bracing themselves for an unprecedented all-out war.

That being so, the outcome would certainly differ from Indera Kayangan which saw a victorious MCA. It will then be a case of the party losing regardless of who wins the MCA elections.

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