

# Shifting Seats *Will it be aakeup in the MCA prompt leadership changes in other members of Malaysia's National Front ruling coalition?*

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**AFTER MUCH BICKERING,** the tussle over how the Malaysian Chinese Association is to be led is finished. The MCA is the second-largest party in Malaysia's National Front ruling coalition. Ling Liong Sik, the president, has resigned from his party post, and so has Lim Ah Lek, his deputy and rival. The outcome of this dispute may demonstrate that changes are afoot in the Malaysian political establishment.

The MCA has become the first major party in the National Front to effect a change in leadership in roughly two decades—though Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad is retiring, his departure from the United Malays National Organization's leadership isn't scheduled until October. With Messrs. Ling and Lim agreeing to step down in a deal brokered by Dr. Mahathir, the party picked 47-year-old Ong Ka Ting as president and Chan Kong Choy, 48, as deputy head-for the first time putting the leadership of a National Front party in the hands of those born too recently to remember Malaysia other than as an independent nation.

No question, others in the National Front could do with an infusion of new blood at the top. The Malaysian Indian Congress has been run by S. Samy Vellu, 67, since 1979, while Gerakan has had a long-time leader in 64-year-old Lim Keng Yaik. In the last general election, the Chinese and Indian vote became more important to the National Front as Anwar Ibrahim's sacking and arrest in 1998 eroded Malay support

for Umno. Dr. Mahathir's intercession in the MCA dispute likely was sparked by the fact that the squabble threatened to be a distraction in the run-up to elections that must be held by the end of next year. Nevertheless, it will give other coalition parties reason to ponder if they too should look for new blood.

Dr. Mahathir's involvement, however, carries a risk. For the question is how this will be viewed by Chinese, some of whom may take it as sign of an erosion in the MCA's independence. Rather than a component of the National Front that champions Chinese rights, has the MCA become just a party for Chinese in the coalition? Beyond this, Mr. Ong has other challenges, such as uniting the party. But if he can manage this—something that has long eluded the party—then the MCA can still have relevance for Chinese. Yet whether he can do this is not a foregone conclusion. Mr. Ong and his deputy come from rival camps, the rather unimaginatively named "Team A" and "Team B." Still, they share the same background. Both were educated at the Tunku Abdul Rahman College, which has a mostly Chinese student body, and were teachers before entering politics. This might help.

When Abdullah Ahmad Badawi takes over from Dr. Mahathir, he is expected to bring new faces into government. The MCA changes may have been intended only to end the bickering, but they will still likely shake up other parties. As a result, they may end up providing more fresh faces for Mr. Abdullah to pick.