

Ushering in a new era .in **MCA** STAR 12 AUG 2003

with Ong and Chan

The Chinese are generally regarded as a down-to-earth lot. The MCA's 50th annual general assembly last Sunday, which marked the threshold of a new era for the 54-year-old party, was testimony to this, writes FOONG PEK YEE.

IT WAS no ordinary **MCA** general assembly and those who attended it last weekend knew the political significance of the event, if not its historic value.

For Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who opened the general assembly, it was the last for him after having opened the party's annual affair since 1981.

For the **MCA**, it was the ushering in of a new era. Taking to the rostrum was 47-year-old Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, clearly confident in his new role as he made his maiden presidential speech.

His predecessor Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, who arrived to attend the meeting wearing a black suit, had jokingly told waiting party delegates and reporters outside Wisma MCA that "I am not in white today. I am here in a different capacity."

The man of the hour was certainly Ong. Many wanted to hear for themselves what he had to say in his speech, after having taken over the party reins just three months ago.

The former disciplinary teacher did not let his listeners down when he delivered his 30-minute speech - giving a broad outline of the party's focus

and future direction.

On Sunday, the delegates gave its endorsement to the rejuvenation of MCA supporting the move to limit the MCA president's term to nine years, making it the first political party in the country to do so.

Party unity remained the focus of the debate with party leaders and delegates taking great pains to stress its importance and learn from past mistakes.

MCA leaders and delegates also recorded their tribute to Dr Mahathir for his contributions and reiterated their full support for Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdulah Ahmad Badawi, to take over the nation's helm.

The mood throughout the assembly was certainly upbeat.

Speaking off the cuff, the Prime Minister had the floor in stitches on several occasions with his wit and analogies to get his message across on the history and importance of co-operation in the Barisan, especially between the MCA and Gerakan, and the true colours of the Opposition.

But the Umno president who expressed his relief that MCA is in good hands, sent a strong signal to his listeners before he left Dewan San Choon - it's time to get ready for the next general election.

And for Ong and his deputy Datuk Chan Kong Choy, dubbed "match made in heaven" by some, it signifies that honeymoon is over and the beginning of the test on their mantle.