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Ling-Politics

THE RISE AND FALL OF DR LING LIONG SIK

By: Alan Ting

KUALA LUMPUR, (Bernama) - He was not seen as a likely presidential candidate of the MCA during the infamous clash between Datuk Dr Neo Yee Pan and Datuk Tan Koon Swan in the 1980s.

Having thrown his weight behind Koon Swan, he was like any other "generals" in the bitter party tussle, till a twist of fate propelled him to the helm of the oldest and biggest Chinese party, a job he held for almost 17 years.

That twist of fate came on Sept 3, 1986 when he, as the deputy president, was appointed to the top post, replacing Koon Swan who had to resign after being sentenced to a two-year jail and a fine of S\$500,000 for criminal breach of trust in Singapore.

Born on Sept 18, 1943, Dr Ling had his early education at the King Edward VII School in Taiping before joining the prestigious Royal Military College (RMC) in Sungai Besi.

From the RMC, Dr Ling studied medicine at the University of Singapore in 1961 and by 1966, he served as a doctor at Penang General Hospital before opting for private practice in Butterworth in 1975.

The medical doctor, with a dead-pan face and gravel voice, launched his political career in 1968 when he joined the MCA and worked his way up to become a Central Committee member in 1974.

EARLY YEARS

In the same year, he was picked to stand in the Mata Kuching (now called Bagan) parliamentary constituency on an MCA ticket and won, retaining the seat for two subsequent terms.

For his achievements in the party, Dr Ling was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Local Government and Federal Territory in 1976.

However, more than a year later, he was made Deputy Information Minister. In 1982, Dr Ling was appointed Deputy Finance Minister.

Two years later, his political fortune took a nose-dive when the party leadership crisis erupted between Yee Pan and Koon Swan. Dr Ling was among the 14 MCA stalwarts led by Koon Swan who were expelled from the MCA.

On March 28, 1984, Dr Ling resigned as Deputy Finance Minister following his expulsion from the MCA but was re-instated into the party on Feb 18, 1985 following the intervention of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He was then appointed Deputy Education Minister and a year later, as the Minister of Transport, replacing Tan Sri Chong Hon Nyan who retired.

SECOND WIND

Fresh from the groundswell of support for Koon Swan and his "generals", Dr Ling beat party stalwarts Wong Seng Chow and Yew Hock Seng for the Deputy MCA president post in the party elections of Nov 24, 1985.

And that set the stage for him to lead the party unchallenged and almost unquestioned till his faithful deputy, Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek, a fellow general of the Koon Swan camp, accused him of not honouring a promise some 14 months earlier.

Ah Lek, who was often described as a reluctant politician, reportedly

said he had a gentleman's pact with Dr Ling in that Dr Ling would promote his (Ah Lek's) protege, Datuk Chan Kong Choy, a party vice president, to full ministership in return for his resignation from the cabinet and later, the party.

Dr Ling instead promoted his own protege, Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, as the Minister of Housing and Local Governments and denied that there was such an agreement with Ah Lek.

This roused Ah Lek out of his "retirement" and split the MCA into the familiar Team A and Team B factions of the Koon Swan-Yee Pan era.

MORE WOES

Party insiders said the problems between the two men began to simmer in the wake of frustration quietly expressed by some party leaders and the grassroots over the MCA's failure to get more cabinet posts to match its electoral success in the last 1999 General Election.

The MCA also had its hopes of getting the chief minister's post in Penang dashed and when its compromise request for the deputy chief minister's post was not even entertained, Dr Ling's detractors blamed it on him.

Things came to a head during a central committee meeting on April 19 when, according to party insiders, Dr Ling came under fire for over an hour from Ah Lek and a few other leaders.

Among other things, he was criticised for not recommending senior parliamentarian Datuk Yap Pian Hon to any government post throughout the three terms Yap served as vice-president until he failed to defend the post in the previous party elections.

Some central committee members also snubbed Dr Ling for the way he selected some of the candidates for the 1999 general election, describing the selection as going against the aspirations of the grassroots.

Then the members from Perak spoke against him for dropping two MPs from the state from the MCA cabinet list - party secretary-general and incumbent minister Datuk Seri Dr Ting Chew Peh and incumbent deputy minister Datuk Loke Yuen Yow.

But it was Ah Lek who was most upset with Dr Ling for breach of promise, said the party insiders.

LAW SUITS AND BUSINESS FAILURES

But this wasn't the only woes of the party president. The financial crisis of July 1997 that hit the region, also devastated the businesses of his associates and son, Hee Liong.

Never before has a MCA president faced a series of high profile legal suits amounting to millions of ringgit. If those are not embarrassment enough, then there is the threat of a former protege-turned-nemesis, Datuk Soh Chee Wen, who seemed ready to spill the beans on his business dealings with the Lings and their companies.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Unlike one of his predecessors, Tan Sri Lee San Choon, who had mooted the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) as one of the five flagship projects of the party, Dr Ling saw to it that UTAR becomes a reality in its Kampar campus.

One project that Dr Ling planned for the party to carry out was the Langkawi project where rural students of all races were to be given special coaching or tuition.

Perhaps the most memorable occasion for Dr Ling in his political career was when he became the Acting Chairman of the Barisan Nasional on Feb 16, 1988. For three minutes he headed the BN Supreme Council meeting to approve the application of "UMNO Baru" to join the BN.

He created a history of sort because the post of BN Chairman has always been held by the UMNO President and Malaysian Prime Minister.

WORK DONE

Dr Ling first announced his intention to step down from the cabinet post on May 22, 2000 but was advised against it by the prime minister. However, after a long vacation, Dr Ling announced on June 6, 2000 that he was willing to continue his ministerial post as Transport Minister which he has held for the past 14 years.

He had admitted that the problem that led to his resignation was due to the MCA being short of one minister's post, and said that the only way to solve the problem was for him to give up his own cabinet post for Kong Choy to become a minister.

However, the story did not end there. He dropped another bombshell last Jan 7 when he announced that he had submitted his letter of resignation.

The undated letter was sent to Dr Mahathir on Aug 15 last year and he said he told the prime minister that he was ready to leave after the official opening of UTAR. The university was officiated by Dr Mahathir on Jan 12, this year.

"I felt that my agenda has been completed," he was quoted as saying then.

-- BERNAMA

AT KGO AHH AO