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Assemblies to mark end to long split

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ON several fronts, the two-day MCA Youth, Wanita MCA and MCA proper annual assemblies starting today, are set to be historic.

For starters, it will be the first time party president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and deputy Datuk Chan Kong Choy attend the AGM in their new-found status following their election on May 23.

Secondly, it will be the last time Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will open the parent body's assembly tomorrow morning after having done so for over two decades.

Dr Mahathir will retire in October, paving the way for Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to take over.

Tomorrow's assembly is also expected to see the formalising of the three-term (or nine-year) limit on the MCA presidency - a first for political parties in Malaysia.

Despite the historical importance accorded to this year's meetings, probably the most salient aspect is that for the first time since 1999, grassroots leaders from all over the country can come together as a united front.

This is by no means a small achievement given the mere 76 days that have passed since what has been regarded as the "official" end to the prolonged deeply-entrenched split.

After Ong and Chan were elected to their posts on May 23, the grassroots have, to a large extent, settled down, putting behind them the venomous words uttered and shameless acts like the throwing of chairs, that marked the Team A-Team B split.

"This year's general assembly will be the general assembly of unity.

Everything is expected to go on smoothly," vice-president Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn said.

Smooth running of MCA general assemblies appeared to be the exception than the rule over the last three years which saw former party president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik heading the party's Team A faction and deputy Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek leading Team B.

In the 2000 AGM, there were strong undercurrents following Dr Ling's resign-and-retract stunt, largely perceived as linked to internal MCA rivalries. The meeting ended with a jeering session.

The following year saw the infamous Aug 3 Youth AGM fracas where chairs flew and top movement leaders verbally abused and physically threatened.

"Let's not look back into the past. Things are different now. We have to prepare for the general election," central committee member Yew Teong Look said.

His colleague in the committee, Datuk Donald Lim, concurred that MCA's preparations for the general election were expected to be one of the hot topics for debate.

"It is the future that matters and we have to work hard and stay united for the general election," added Lim who was recently elevated to Deputy Information Minister.

Indeed, after a prolonged period of "pointing the guns" at fellow comrades, there is now a realisation that the "enemy" is outside MCA, comprising mainly the Opposition parties.

The polls are not due until early 2005, but going by the gut feeling of some MCA leaders, this year's party assembly will be the last before the general election is called.

Human Resources Minister Dr Fong said the term-limitation proposal for the president, Youth head and Wanita head will be one of the highlights in the assemblies.

The MCA proper assembly, the highest body in MCA, is expected to amend the party constitution to limit to nine years the tenure of the three posts effective 2002.

"The grassroots are generally acceptable to the idea. I do not foresee any controversy to this proposed amendment to the MCA constitution," Lim said.

Designed to break the so-called 10-year-or-so cycle before the resurrection of a party split, the idea was first proposed at the height of the Team A-Team B crisis.

Educational issues, especially Chinese education which touches on the raw nerve of the community, are also expected to be debated at length.

But whatever topics delegates choose to raise, leaders on stage during the meetings can sit tight knowing that this year's assembly will not go down in history for all the wrong reasons.