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At long last, peace and stability look promising after a long-drawn crisis

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DESPITE initial doubts and drama, the MCA baton has finally been passed to Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting who has been installed as the president of the second largest component party of Barisan Nasional with Datuk Chan Kong Choy his deputy.

Still, questions linger over whether they will be able to put an end to the long-drawn crisis involving immediate past president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and his deputy Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek.

Dr Ling, who headed the Team A faction, had favoured Ong to succeed him while Lim who led the dissident Team B, favoured Chan.

Besides inheriting the posts from their mentors, Ong and Chan have taken over a party reeling from a leadership crisis since the 1999 general election.

But it must be said that at the core of the protracted crisis is the leadership tussle. The first signs of dissension emerged after Dr Ling did not promote Chan as minister despite promising to do so back in 1996.

Now that Chan has been elevated to deputy president, speculation is rife that he will be made a minister soon, considering Dr Ling had tendered an undated resignation from the Cabinet last year.

This, by itself, would appease many of the Chan's supporters who were initially unhappy over Dr Ling who had favoured Housing and Local Government Minister Ong.

And then there is the departure of the old guard. Invariably, the Team A-Team B struggle is perceived as a personal feud between Dr Ling and Lim.

Over the years, a series of events, including Dr Ling's resign-and-retract saga in 2000, the supposed sabotage of the succession talks in early 2001 and the Nanyang takeover controversy had soured relationship between the two.

With the fading away of the two most senior leaders in MCA, it will now be up to the Ong-Chan leadership to get rid of any excess baggage carried from their predecessors.

Both young leaders have expressed willingness to put aside factional politics and work together and help the party close ranks.

Even at the height of the crisis, both had refrained from lashing out at each other to avoid burning bridges with the opposing camp.

A Selangor leader pointed out that with the benefit of hindsight, Pahang chairman Chan had remained silent on a host of issues during the crisis, including on the Petaling Jaya Utara phantom members controversy, on triads in MCA and the PR status of Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen.

Likewise, Ong had also been evasive during the crisis to avoid landing himself in controversy.

But more importantly, it is the MCA leaders' refusal to be seen as upsetting the peace plan which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad brokered that would hold the party together - at least until the next general election.

The resignation of Dr Ling and Lim is one of the last phases of the peace plan drawn up by Dr Mahathir last April upon requests by both Team A and Team B leaders.

Even vice-president Datuk Chua Jui Meng, seen as a one-time favourite to assume the MCA presidency, "followed the script to the letter" in the central committee meeting on Friday which saw the planned phasing out of Dr Ling and Lim and the eventual elevation of the Ong-Chan team.

At the end of the day, it is the realisation that BN interests over personal ambition had prevailed. No MCA leader wanted to be accused of sabotaging a reconciliatory effort - and risked being dropped, whether as local councillors or ministers.

Besides, fatigue was setting in among MCA leaders after years of mudslinging - energy that could be channelled towards gearing up for the general election, due in 2004.

But how long the peace will last remains to be seen. One immediate concern is how the government posts will be allocated.

If Chan is promoted a Minister, who will take over his deputy ministership? If an existing parliamentary secretary were to do so, then, there will be two posts up for grabs.

And then, there is the question of the candidates for the next general election and who will become the 25 new divisional pro-tem chairmen following the formation of new parliamentary constituencies.

Even in peace time, naming a particular candidate - and not naming the other - for these positions is bound to create dissatisfaction, what more after the party had gone through a protracted split.

And then, there is the problem of the leadership not having the stamp of legitimacy. Ong appears to have inherited the throne because Dr Ling favoured him, and Chan because he is Lim's blue-eyed boy.

Their election to the top two posts in MCA is not by the general assembly, but by the central committee, whose members themselves are there simply because they "won" a no-contest party election last year (which is part of the peace plan).

On the ground, it takes a lot of convincing for divisional and branch leaders to accept the rationale for the election of the top two MCA leaders - and to some extent, earn their respect.

After all, these grassroots leaders are not the ones who will enjoy the "spoils of the war", like ministerial and deputy ministerial positions.

This can lead to pent-up dissatisfaction, possibly making way for yet another showdown in the 2005 MCA elections. Whether this can be averted and how well the party can recover from the crisis will depend on the leadership qualities of Ong and Chan and the maturity of their supporters.

But what is clear is that at long last, stability is returning to the party. At least for now, it looks promising.