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Baptism of fire

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IT LOOKS like a case of one ong too many for newly installed Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) President Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting.

For claiming that he did not know a certain Ong King Ee, a Penang MCA member who is being sought by the police for allegedly trying to revive a secret society on the island, the Housing and Local Government Minister has found himself in an awkward situation.

In Chinese, ong means prosperity. But for now, it is the kind of prosperity that the minister can do without. The case is serious enough to warrant the party's Central Committee to seek his explanation. The Press has been on the story for months.

The question is not so much about him knowing or not knowing his Penang namesake. It is impossible for any politician to know or to be seen with only law-abiding men and women.

A politician is bound to meet, get to know and be photographed with all kinds of people, including the unsavoury types.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would tell you, he has had countless people approaching him to have their photographs taken with him only to use them later to prove to others that they knew him well.

In fact, there are politicians who make it their business to mix with unsavoury types in their attempt to better society. They work with convicts, ex-convicts, drug addicts and the like.

So, what is so wrong if the new MCA President, in the course of carrying out his duties to the party and government, comes across a criminal or an alleged criminal?

It is humanly impossible to distinguish or know everyone by name when one is dealing with hundreds or even thousands of people at a meeting or a fund-raising dinner.

What is wrong is not telling the truth. And after months of denying, Ka Ting admitted on July 19 that he knew his Penang namesake.

The admission, according to The Malay Mail newspaper, came only after it front-paged on July 18 a picture showing Ka Ting standing side by side with the fugitive at a function to launch the Wan Thor Boey Branch/MCA Gurney Drive in Penang in February 2001.

It could have been a genuine oversight on the part of the minister, but having to admit later that he was aware of King Ee's criminal record and detention under the Emergency Ordinance when he joined MCA in 2000 is damaging to say the least.

Even if what has been reported by the Press so far is only partially correct, the MCA President has the duty to explain his stance not only to his party but the people as a whole.

Sadly though, such a task would be rendered even more complicated because until his appointment as Housing and Local Government Minister in December 1999, Ong was, for four-and-a-half years, the Deputy Home Minister.

Every politician has to undergo one form of baptism of fire or another. Perhaps, this is Ka Ting's fiery baptism as the MCA President.