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Bickering bedfellows

DESCRIBING what the Malaysian Chinese Association has been in recent years recalls the term used by Sri Lanka for its "cohabitation" Government. Not to put too fine a point on it, this euphemism stands for an administration in which the principals can't stand each other but must stand together or fall apart. The MCA has made a dark art of this, so much so that the party actually receives credit for somehow being able to keep limping on despite wounds that never heal.

Speaking at the opening of the MCA's annual general assembly two years ago, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad described Umno and the MCA as the "backbones" of the Barisan Nasional - and wryly added: "But sometimes we get backaches too." The prime minister was referring at the time to the bust-up at the MCA Youth meeting the day before, which had led to a walk-out of 400 delegates, which Youth chief Datuk Ong Tee Keat now says was the work of triads.

MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik demands proof; Ong says he'll only give it to the police; Dr Ling says Ong can choose to abide by the party's constitution or leave.

Although there is a snowflake of relief in the reminder that the MCA indeed has a constitution to be abided by, Dr Ling should know that the disgruntled can be just as big a nuisance outside the party as within. The rift within the MCA has only deepened in the years it has been papered-over, and the party's cellular toxins have seeped into the fissure and are welling up. The party chieftains themselves say that money politics, corporate corruption and secret-society thuggery are rife in the MCA.

So far, the Barisan Nasional has not been too badly affected, once again demonstrating the effectiveness of the coalition's ability to shore up each component's weaknesses with its partners' strengths. But the MCA's distress is a corrosive overspill for the BN to contend with in the approach to a general election. Insofar as the BN model of consociation is replicated within the component parties themselves, the MCA is making a farce of form over substance. It is a party almost completely divided, but in denial.

Yet, the party's bitter internal acrimony still indicates a desire for unity. If "politics is the art of the possible", why can't the strength of will required to cohabit with the unloved be applied to a more honourable goal? It is always a glum day when the BN has to step in to help one of its own component parties, all of whom are ostensibly pledged to help the BN. But that is also part of the coalition's concordat. At the present pass, the MCA should take pause to look out the windows of their fractious house and see the rest of the country looking in, watching and listening, in shame and anguish.