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Is the Samy Vellu era nearing an end?

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IS it time for Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu to make way for a new MIC president after nearly 25 years of calling the shots in a party which he almost single-handedly rebuilt on taking over in 1979?

Are there compelling enough reasons for the longest-serving MIC president ever to give up his party post and, by extension, his Cabinet position?

Who determines if Samy Vellu should step down from a post which is almost guaranteed to him in his lifetime with the mass support he has arduously built since taking over from Tan Sri V. Manikavasagam?

In fact, is there anyone in the party capable of taking over from Samy Vellu who has overshadowed all second echelon leaders in the MIC through sheer force of personality and adept use of political manoeuvres?

These are among a slew of questions making the rounds in the Indian community which is actively engaged in what could very well be the most important debate ever involving its well-being.

It all began recently when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad appealed to veteran Barisan Nasional leaders to step down and make way for their successors in exactly the same fashion as the Prime Minister.

The issue assumed greater significance when Indian Progressive Front president and former MIC vice-president Datuk M.G. Pandithan and People's Progressive Party president Datuk M. Kayveas entered the debate with diametrically opposing points of view.

Pandithan, as could be expected of a promising young MIC leader forced out of power by Samy Vellu, added a twist to the equation by suggesting that his party would be able to join the BN if Datuk S. Subramaniam was at the helm of the MIC.

The unsaid point was that Samy Vellu was seemingly a stumbling block to unity within the Indian community in his obstinate refusal to allow the IPF to join the BN.

Kayveas, often at loggerheads with Samy vellu, quite unexpectedly rallied to his side this time around, saying no one could match the former's ability to lead the MIC.

There is, of course, a general undercurrent of expectations among Malaysians that veteran leaders, who came to power with Dr Mahathir relinquish their posts according to his timetable, to allow Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to start with a Cabinet of his choice.

By any reckoning, 24 years in office is a long time, making Samy Vellu the longest-serving party president, surpassing Tun V.T. Sambanthan who was in the Independence Cabinet by eight years.

And in this respect, Samy Vellu's detractors did not mince their words, especially in the Tamil daily Malaysia Nanban, in urging him to respect the Prime Minister's wishes and step down.

The message was clear: do not be MIC president for life.

While certain veteran BN leaders did not respond directly to Dr Mahathir's request, preferring to allow subordinates to make the play, Samy Vellu stated unequivocally that he would stay as long as members wanted him.

This is indeed the case, given his quite unique position among BN component party chiefs as far as strength within the party is concerned.

The voluble, charismatic and high profile leader has virtually no challenger in the party, having stitched up grassroot support through a

clever mix of party appointments and patronisation by virtue of the MIC being the sole conduit for government largesse to the community.

There is no way, therefore, that Samy Vellu will voluntarily step aside for a successor; there being really no water-tight assurance that his deputy Subramaniam will take over to inherit what is arguably the most powerful office to be held by an Indian in the land.

Samy Vellu, who became acting president in 1979 and party chief in 1981, had indicated he wants another term in office when presidential elections are held next March, to finish projects like the Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology (AIMST).

The MIC president will be 70 and Subramaniam 62 if branch chairmen grant Samy Vellu his wishes, which they most certainly can be expected to.

Samy Vellu may end up an anachronism along with Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik in a Cabinet where most of their peers are a generation younger.

The ensuing question then should be whether members can force his hand as he is unlikely to step down on his own.

The structure of the MIC precludes such a possibility as only branch chairmen, most of whom are there by virtue of being Samy Vellu supporters, can elect the party president.

At this juncture, one has to look at what could be the deciding factor in any equation involving the post of MIC president: is there anyone within the party with the capacity to rival Samy Vellu's charisma and political savvy?

Subramaniam, with his vast experience in government and the party, can rightly be expected to efficiently manage the MIC but perhaps not the members, who may revert to the boisterous and unruly days of the 1970s and 1980s.

The genial Deputy Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister is seen as lacking the wherewithal to manage a generation of MIC members who have come to respect Samy Vellu's iron-fisted rule which brooks no dissent.

Another factor here is whether Samy Vellu is seeing Subramaniam as his heir apparent, and is willing to voluntarily hand over power now, or anytime in the future.

This is inevitably related to Subramaniam's bids in the past to take over through the ballot box which failed miserably and led to so-called rival camps in the party. The last time Subramaniam, who became deputy president in 1981, took on Samy Vellu in the presidential election was in 1989, where he only managed about 42 per cent of the votes.

Despite the obvious detente between the party supremo and his deputy for the past decade or so, the latter's ambivalence over recent calls for Samy Vellu's resignation have fuelled speculation that all is not well.

Subramaniam's deafening silence in the wake of Pandithan's and Kayveas' statements has led to speculation that he may be avoiding a situation where his chances of eventually taking over may be scuttled by open support for a continuation of Samy Vellu's leadership.

Even a response in the New Straits Times to a Bernama report commenting on his vacillation in the matter failed to elicit an adequate response, with the second-in-command in the party sidestepping the question.

The political waters have become even more murky with a suggestion given prominence in the Malaysia Nanban that Subramaniam be promoted to full minister in Abdullah's Cabinet. This can only happen if the MIC is given two ministers' posts as was the case when Tan Sri V. Manickavasagam and Tan Sri Athi Nahappan were ministers in the 1970s.

The only other possibility is if Samy Vellu hands over his Cabinet post to Subramaniam - which can be ruled out. None of the three vice-presidents - Datuk S. Veerasingham, Datuk G. Palanivel and Tan Sri K.S. Nijhar - can

be seen as serious successors to Samy Vellu or Subramaniam at the moment, although Palanivel stands the best chance by virtue of being the youngest of the three.

But this may be distant on the political horizon as he has yet to gain the credentials needed to lead a community that has more than its fair share of political, economic and social challenges.

The only way that Malaysians may, therefore, see an end to the Samy Vellu era is if he gives up office of his own volition.

And that is not likely to happen in the near future.