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Party unity the top priority for Ka Ting

Chow Kum Hor

MCA's new president, Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, is upbeat about the party's process to heal old wounds and rebuild unity and stability. Although there is much to be done, he tells CHOW KUM HOR that response from party grassroots is encouraging.

Q: Firstly, you have been approached for an interview for some time. Since you took over as MCA president on May 23, there have been many such requests. What was holding you back?

A: I have not given interviews to any other newspapers. First of all, there was so much urgent work to be done. Efforts must be put in to re-unite the party. That was the top priority the moment I took over. I knew that the responsibility would be very heavy on me. Expectations were very high. Leaders at all levels were expecting, with the taking over of the presidency and deputy presidency, the party to be re-united again.

That was the most urgent matter that I had to do. I spent almost every day and every hour working hand-in-hand with (deputy president Datuk Chan) Kong Choy. I went out of the way to talk to grassroots members and leaders and strategise ways and means to regain the confidence of teamwork among those previously aligned to different factions.

There was no point for me to start talking to the media, saying I want to do this and do that, and yet the party was not united. To me, the precondition was the party must, to a great extent, be united. Only then I am eligible to talk.

Q: Can you please describe the two months or so since you took over the MCA presidency?

A: It was very challenging and tough, but it was also encouraging. Kong Choy and I, together with the other central and State leaders, worked hard as a team in showing our willingness and aspirations to put the party together again. What has motivated me, even though there were stressful moments, was that most of the people I talked to after I explained to them the larger picture, responded positively. They were feeling the same pulse as I was.

Q: What were the issues you found challenging over the past two months?

A: It was challenging to convince leaders who were at loggerheads in the past to work together.

Q: Is that all? What about the "Jackie Chan" issue?

A: No, no. That issue is over. The first challenge was the Cabinet reshuffle. I had to think deep and hard how I could have a united line-up. That reshuffle must reflect unity. You have to put suitable people there, consider State representation and make MCA more effective in the Government. There is no perfect formula. The Prime Minister, very kindly, after considering MCA's request, helped MCA by giving us a line-up which is balanced.

Generally, the grassroots are happy although it will not satisfy everyone.

The second challenge was how to make the senior leaders, especially those senior to me, to work with the younger leadership. I am very appreciative that the senior leaders were sincere and helpful, irrespective of which faction they were previously aligned to.

Third, was the Youth wing problems. Youths are usually more impulsive and their level of tolerance is not like the senior ones. After talking to them and with the help of other party leaders, we managed to calm them

down. To a large extent, they have accepted the peace formula and are helping to stabilise the movement.

Q: You were slightly more than two months ago only the third vice-president in MCA. Over-night, you became - if you go by the seating arrangement in the Dewan Rakyat - the third-most senior leader in Malaysia after the Prime Minister and his deputy. How does that make you feel? Do you feel overwhelmed?

A: (Laughs) I took this as a big challenge and responsibility. I never dare think that I should be proud of the post I hold. To me, since I have such a heavy responsibility on my shoulders, I keep reminding myself that I have to work hard, be humble and do my level best not to let anybody down. That is the kind of mental preparation I have.

Q: As the top leader representing the Chinese community in the Government, what kind of vision do you have? (Former president) Tan Sri Lee San Choon had his Five Projects. Is there, for example, a "Ka Ting Roadmap" on the cards?

A: One reason why I was reluctant to be interviewed by newspapers was because as MCA president, every word that I say will be seen as MCA's direction. Over the past two months, while I have worked tirelessly to resolve party problems, I also think about future plans. At the same time, I have never neglected my work in the Housing and Local Government Ministry.

MCA is in the process of revamping its research and planning bureau, also known as Insap. I am also getting more views from the MCA CC (central committee) and PC (presidential council) members before we come up with an action plan. After collecting all the data and input and having taken stock of what we have just gone through, MCA will come up with an action plan.

Of course, the party will continue the policies of my predecessor, Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, like Utar (Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman), TAR (Tunku Abdul Rahman) College and the Langkawi Project. All these have to go on.

On top of that, we want to change the attitude of the Chinese community. We want to prepare them to work together with other races, and have good understanding with other races. The whole world is changing. We have to think how to change this attitude and this is a big project.

We want to build inter-racial smart partnerships and synergies. All these will be part of our strategy.

Q: Some people think that there is a generation gap between you and other leaders in the BN component parties. They say people like (Umno president) Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, (Umno deputy president) Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, (MIC president) Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu and (Gerakan president) Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik are old enough to be your father.

A: I can work with them. I will be very respectful and humble in our relationship. I have very high respect for Dr Mahathir and Pak Lah (Abdullah). My relationship with Datuk Seri Samy, Datuk Seri Keng Yaik, Datuk Amar Leo Moggie (former Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak president) and Umno ministers is good and cordial. I don't think age is a problem. The important thing is there must be respect and we must be open-minded to work together.

Q: Let's go back to your ascension as MCA president. There is a perception that you got the post because you were closely-aligned to Dr Ling. Is that a fair statement?

A: I have 23 years of grassroots and leadership experience. I have served in various capacities at divisional, State and national levels. I was elected twice as vice-president and was into my third term when I was

chosen by the central committee to be president.

In short, I have been democratically endorsed before I became the president. I have served various government posts at the federal level - as political secretary (to Dr Ling), parliamentary secretary, deputy minister and minister - over 17 years. I have gone through the training and have the necessary exposure both in the party and Government over a reasonable period of time. It was not a drastic rise but a gradual one.

Q: What role would Dr Ling now play in MCA and how extensive would his influence be?

A: Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik is still Utar chairman. When Utar started, he had laid the networking and foundation and he is the right man for the job. He will also be involved in TAR College as Utar and TAR College are related. He will not be involved in MCA affairs.

Q: He will not be operating behind the scenes in the party as some think?

A: No, he will not.

Q: You have completed your tour of all States by opening the MCA conventions there. What is your view of the sentiment on the ground? Have the wounds from the Team A-Team B rivalry healed?

A: They have not healed 100 per cent. You cannot expect, after two months or so, everything will be okay. It takes time for them to heal completely. But I am glad that the central and State leaders have responded positively.

Each time I spoke at the conventions, it was always about unity. The Chinese community is facing a lot of challenges. The country is also facing a lot of challenges. I told them to waste no time in internal squabbles. I told them we had to unite quickly.

The Chinese community must work with other communities and get involved in more nation-building tasks. We have to face the challenges of globalisation, the knowledge-based economy and the "China Effect".

These will all affect us. When those messages were presented, the response was very positive. As I moved from State to State, my confidence kept building up. Even those who previously could not see eye-to-eye are coming together now.

Q: There is fear that in 2005 (when the next party elections are due), internal rivalry will resurface. Do you think so?

A: I am inclined to be more positive about that. Things are so much better now than before. Response from the grassroots has been very encouraging. They want to see peace and unity. They want to see Kong Choy and I work together.

The present central leadership is working very well as a team. We will work very hard to ensure the present unity can go beyond 2005.

Q: Can you please describe your ties with Kong Choy?

A: We have had very good ties in the past 22 years. We have never quarrelled. We share a similar educational background. Both of us were born and grew up in new villages. On a lot of issues, we share similar views.

We have grown very close over the years, since the day we were together touring the country some 20 years back to give talks to new party members.

Even during the two years of so-called crisis, both of us were still close friends. We debated on issues and did not get into personal attacks. A good example was "The Great Debate" during the Nanyang takeover EGM. I was one of the speakers (in favour of the takeover).

When it was my turn, I said I had no problems working with Kong Choy (who opposed the takeover). He then waved his hand. You could see that the delegates' response was very good. There was thunderous applause. They wanted both of us to work together and they wanted unity in the party.

Q: The appointment of Kong Choy as Transport Minister, a post traditionally held by the MCA president, raised some eyebrows. Is it true that MCA had proposed someone other than Kong Choy for that portfolio?

A: MCA submitted only one name to fill the vacant ministerial post. It is the Prime Minister's prerogative to decide on Cabinet appointments. It is not proper for me to talk about things concerning the powers of the Prime Minister.

As I have said just now, the grassroots are generally happy with the new Cabinet line-up.

Q: What do you consider as MCA's biggest challenge now?

A: There are a few challenges. They are not that big. The first one is to have party unity. We are near to achieving that.

The second one is to get the Chinese community to support MCA in the next general election. We want to convince them that MCA can effectively represent them in the Government and can take care of their interests.

Q: The general election is expected to be called soon and pressure is mounting on MCA to deliver the Chinese votes. Can MCA live up to the expectations?

A: We have to work hard and be very sincere to the Chinese community. We must show our determination that we are there for them. With the party becoming more united, I am confident MCA will perform well in the next general election.

Q: The DAP has tried very hard to disassociate itself from Pas, partly to endear itself to the Chinese community. How big a threat is the party to MCA and BN?

A: The DAP's influence is waning. It doesn't have a clear vision and is interested only in exploiting and sensationalising issues. They can't deliver.

Openly, they say they have nothing to do with Pas, but in reality, they have some kind of co-operation. The DAP is not consistent. DAP is nowhere near the kind of track record of the BN in helping the various communities. Still, we must be cautious of DAP's ability to use all kinds of tactics to garner votes. I am sure the people can see through the DAP.

Q: Rightly or wrongly, Umno and Pas are perceived as trying to out-Islamise each other in order to win the Malay votes. This seems to come at the expense of the non-Malays. How does the MCA feel about this?

A: Pas is a party that politicises religion. They always have political motives. In front of the Chinese community, Pas tries to sweet-talk and deceive them. They promise the Chinese 101 things which they cannot deliver. But in front of the Muslims, they try to sell their fanatical ideas.

Pas has shown its true colours in Terengganu by implementing overzealous policies that are not suitable for this multiracial country.

Umno is not like Pas. Umno is part of Barisan Nasional, a multiracial coalition.