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Ling's resignation announcement leaves the MCA situation extremely fluid

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WITH the benefit of hindsight, the tell-tale signs prior to Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik's bombshell announcement of his resignation on Tuesday were there.

Donning a dark suit, the MCA president who has over the years perfected the art of hiding his emotions, appeared sombre, as he sat in during the Prime Minister's Press conference after the Barisan Nasional supreme council meeting.

Dr Ling, 59, showed no signs of being elated over the council's decision to endorse - albeit partially - MCA's controversial move to indefinitely suspend its two errant Penang Assemblymen.

Immediately after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Press conference, journalists crowded around Dr Ling for his reaction.

This time, however, he insisted on holding a more arranged Press conference at the foyer outside the council meeting room unlike the usual ad hoc sessions.

The doctor-turned-politician then announced matter-of-factly his resignation as even the most seasoned of journalists listened in disbelief.

For months, there had been talk about Dr Ling's impending exit from active politics but it was proven to be unsubstantiated, then.

When talk of Dr Ling having sent the undated resignation letter surfaced about two months after the Prime Minister's peace plan for MCA was announced last April, Dr Ling's aides were quick to dismiss it.

The last thing journalists expected on Tuesday was the confirmation coming from the horse's mouth in a period of relative stability in MCA.

Still, the timing of Dr Ling's announcement raises many questions, including whether Dr Mahathir's revelation on the existence of the letter to top leaders of BN component parties in the meeting earlier, had forced Dr Ling to make the announcement.

The absence of Dr Ling's aides, including his Press secretary, at such an important announcement only lent credence to the speculation that the statement was issued without prior arrangement.

Besides, it would have been better for Dr Ling to personally make the announcement than risk the news being leaked out by other council members, numbering more than 30, who attended the meeting.

More uncanny about the timing of the announcement was that it came one day after Dr Ling's rival and MCA deputy president Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek announced his intention to bid for the presidency in the party polls in 2005.

Whether by chance or design, Dr Ling's announcement had essentially forced Lim into a corner by implying that it was Dr Mahathir who had wanted him (Dr Ling) to stay on until the Prime Minister had fixed a date for the resignation.

With the grassroots members still reeling from the news of the resignation, top MCA leaders are now grappling with the possible scenarios ahead, each with the agenda of prolonging their own political survival.

Barely hours after Dr Ling's announcement, the party's Team A faction which he heads met in the Transport Minister's house in Bukit Damansara, while Team B met at its operations centre in a hotel.

One lingering question will be the date for Dr Mahathir to effect the resignation, and in the interim period, whether Dr Ling will be deemed a

lame-duck leader.

For sure, jostling to fill the soon to-be-vacated Cabinet post has started, and insofar as MCA politics is concerned, allocation of ministerial posts touches on a raw nerve, if not singled out as the root cause of the protracted party crisis.

And then, there is the question of party succession, or more importantly, how a smooth transition of power can take place. It will, after all, be difficult for Dr Ling to cling on to his party post beyond the present term without a senior government position.

In reality, however, this is easier said than done, with the hatred following the Team A-Team B rivalry still deeply entrenched.

Several possible scenarios could play out in the following weeks or months.

Dr Ling, in wanting to pass the leadership baton to his perceived protege and vice-president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, may get two-thirds of the 41-member central committee to resign.

Under the constitution, this would pave the way for a fresh election of the central committee - a move that would give Ong the edge considering Dr Ling, using the party machinery, would back Ong's ascendancy.

However, this is unlikely to happen as some of the 32 Team A central committee members may defect following the latest turn of events.

Then, if Dr Ling were to give up his party presidency, the constitution stipulates that Lim is assured of an automatic elevation as the party's seventh president - a move Team A is bent against.

But that still leaves the question of who will fill the ministerial post, which is the more immediate concern as Dr Ling can technically stay on as president until 2005.

In terms of party hierarchy, Lim is the most senior leader without a ministerial post.

Alternatively, the post could be given to Lim's protege and vice-president Datuk Chan Kong Choy, whose being denied of a ministership is said to have sparked one of the worst MCA crises in history.

If that being the case, it could see a phasing out of the leaders of the two factions from politics, and the dawn of an era where their respective proteges lead MCA.

Still, with the situation now extremely fluid, with the future looking sketchy at best, one thing is certain: the time has finally come for aspiring top MCA leaders to show what they are made of.