

11/01/2003

Ling cannot cry wolf anymore as next cry from MCA chief will be ignored

Shamsul Akmar

MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik has truly acquired a knack of taking resignations to greater heights.

Recall the first time he tendered his resignation, in May 2000.

After retracting it two weeks later, perceptions were created that MCA vice-president Datuk Chan Kong Choy was the culprit in the episode.

It was generally perceived that Dr Ling decided to quit so as to give his Transport Ministership to Chan, who was the protege of Deputy MCA president Datuk Lim Ah Lek.

The way the tale was yarned then was that when Lim decided to quit politics in 1999, Dr Ling offered to name Chan to be a full Minister under the MCA quota.

However, after the 1999 general election, Chan was only made a Deputy Minister, leading to protests from the Lim and Chan supporters.

That led Dr Ling to resign on the grounds that there was no more ministerial quota for the MCA and if Chan insisted on it, he (Dr Ling) would have to resign to give way.

When that occurred, reactions from the public were quite strong against Chan, who was perceived then as being "greedy" for position, to the extent that the party president had to sacrifice himself.

Such reactions were not only confined to MCA but also came from other component parties.

Most were glad when Dr Ling retracted his decision and Chan's image was tarnished.

The episode was probably the catalyst that led to the present MCA Team A and Team B conflict.

Tuesday's announcement by Dr Ling of his resignation letter to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad seems to be going in the same direction.

It was unsolicited and it came from Dr Ling's own mouth.

No doubt, there had been much speculation about Dr Ling resigning in the last 10 months, and much of it had to do with problems in his party and the inability of the MCA to deal with the Chinese community on Government policies, as well as the issue of the two errant MCA Assemblymen from Penang.

But all this speculation was never confirmed by Dr Ling or his close associates.

Suddenly, after a Barisan Nasional meeting which actually endorsed an MCA decision to only suspend the two assemblymen instead of sacking them as demanded by senior coalition partners Umno and Gerakan, Dr Ling, coming out of the meeting, decided to disclose his letter of resigning from his Cabinet post.

Close aides claimed that Dr Ling decided to make public his resignation letter as it was brought up by Dr Mahathir at the BN Supreme Council meeting.

"It is better that Dr Ling makes it public rather than reporters getting to know about it from one of the 30 people who were present," they said.

"At least, Dr Ling can make sure that the matter is not taken out of context and used to discredit him," they said.

That makes sense. A pre-emptive measure which can put a stop to much unnecessary speculation.

As events unfolded, the pre-emptive measure led to Dr Mahathir

confirming the resignation letter which was submitted on Aug 15 last year, and that he had yet to accept the resignation.

After Dr Mahathir came out saying that he was not accepting the resignation yet, the issue was steadily doused.

Much as on the surface it seems to be much ado about nothing, the impact of Dr Ling's announcement sent leaders of Team B reeling.

For one, it was just a day earlier that his estranged deputy Lim had announced that he would challenge Ling for the top party post in 2005, when MCA elections are due.

Lim, when announcing his plans to challenge Dr Ling, made a qualifier that he would only go for the post if Dr Ling is still around and nobody else was taking him on.

Even though Dr Ling's announcement was only on his resignation as Transport Minister, it is generally perceived as a first and gradual step towards his not defending or resigning from his MCA presidency.

With that, Lim's challenge seems to be hitting Dr Ling's shadow and nothing more.

"It is as good as telling Lim to hold his horses. Why bring up all the talk about challenging someone who is not even interested in being there," pointed out an observer.

It does look like that.

It seems the carpet was truly pulled from under Lim's feet as Dr Ling's announcement made the former look so keen to fight someone who is so ready to give up.

At the same time, the message sent by Dr Ling was that he truly wanted to give up since last year but he remained because the Prime Minister wanted him to stay.

That Dr Mahathir had the following day said he had yet to accept Dr Ling's resignation sent conflicting messages that the BN chairman has not been very happy with the manner Dr Ling had handled the issues of Chinese schools over the English policies and the two errant MCA Assemblymen.

The whole episode only served to make Dr Ling come out smelling like a rose.

But there are several things which do not tally in terms of Dr Ling's intentions.

He is resigning his Cabinet post and not the MCA presidency.

If he sees the setting-up of Utar as having completed a large part of his agenda, it is then an MCA agenda and not that of the Transport Ministry.

That being the case, he should be talking about resigning as the MCA president as well, on which he has been evasive.

Furthermore, after the Prime Minister formulated the peace plan for the MCA last year, the understanding was that both Dr Ling and Lim would step down together and leave the party in the hands of the second echelon.

Of course, the shaping of the MCA leadership after Dr Ling and Lim is for the party members to determine but at the same time, the nation too is concerned as to whether the senior partner in the BN can resolve the crisis within.

Observers believe that the MCA's protracted crisis would be easier resolved after the top two leaders representing Team A and B are out of the picture.

As it is, many believe that Dr Ling's anointed successor Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting has a better chance of bringing the party together if he is prepared to work with Lim's protege Chan.

However, if Ong is going to continue with Dr Ling's legacy of sidelining Team B, he (Ong) is only going to inherit the prevailing crisis.

While such speculations persist, Dr Ling has come out of this

resignation announcement intact, and made sure he lives to the reputation of a cat of a politician who has nine lives.

But announcing his resignation twice is becoming much like someone who cried wolf.

The next cry will definitely be ignored.