

17/08/2003

Love-hate ties of Gerakan, MCA won't help BN in polls

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SPIRITS of past animosity between MCA and Gerakan must have been invoked during the current month of the Hungry Ghosts Festival.

The perennial love-hate relationship between the two Chinese-based parties hogged the headlines - for all the wrong reasons.

Although ties between both parties have historically been marked by sporadic hiccups, of late the relationship between the two Barisan Nasional component parties seems to have hit a new low.

And it took no less than the Prime Minister to remind both parties of the spirit of camaraderie within BN.

Last Sunday, when opening MCA's general assembly Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said MCA and Gerakan were like siblings and abang tentu sayangkan adik dan adik pula janganlah buat kacau (the elder brother loves the younger one and the younger one should not cause trouble).

Clearly, the "elder brother" here refers to MCA, the second most senior component party in BN after Umno.

Dr Mahathir's advice came after Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik had last month said in Penang that MCA, as the elder sibling should not try to "kill off" Gerakan.

Gerakan secretary-general Chia Kwang Chye said the problem started after the 1999 general election when two Penang assemblymen who contested on the Gerakan ticket defected to the MCA days after the polls.

The crossover increased MCA's representatives in the State Assembly to 11, compared to Gerakan's eight, supposedly giving the former more leverage to demand for the Penang Chief Minister's post.

However, the top BN leadership decided to let Gerakan keep the chief ministership, putting paid to the apparent MCA ploy at grabbing the post using the numbers game.

Incidentally, the duo, Lim Chien Aun (Bayan Lepas) and Lim Boo Chang (Datuk Keramat) are children of founding leaders of Gerakan.

The next big trial for MCA and Gerakan came when Boo Chang and fellow MCA assemblywoman Tan Cheng Liang (Jawi) abstained in an Opposition motion at a Penang Legislative Assembly meeting in November last year.

For Gerakan, the abstention amounted to a sabotage of the Penang BN Government, leading to calls for their sacking.

Mounting pressure from Gerakan and other parties like Umno saw MCA suspending Boo Chang and Tan.

Just as the dust was settling, another fuss was kicked up when MCA last month lifted the duo's suspension after seven months.

"The suspension was lifted without getting the endorsement from the BN supreme council. This is not normally done," Chia, who is Energy, Communications and Multimedia Ministry Parliamentary Secretary said.

MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting had, however, said Dr Mahathir had given the green light for MCA to reinstate the duo.

That the friction happened mostly, but not exclusively, in Penang illustrates the underlying competition by both parties to represent the Chinese community.

Penang is still regarded by some as the Chinese heartland in Malaysia although the population of other races there has increased over the years.

MCA is said to be still hoping to get the State's top executive post, its confidence buoyed by its higher representation in the State Assembly now.

Gerakan, on the other hand, is still not over with the back-stabbing episode after the 1999 general election which saw the party almost losing its jewel in the crown.

This time around, the spotlight on the strained MCA-Gerakan ties appears to have stemmed from the heightened anticipation from both parties for the next general election.

For one, seat allocation for the newly-created constituencies is likely to be a thorny issue for MCA and Gerakan; each wants a larger slice of the cake than the other is willing to give.

But more importantly is how well both parties can work together, especially in Penang, a State also being eyed by the DAP.

Chia said he hoped that divisive issues would not be raised by MCA in the run-up to the general election and chief among his concerns was which party would stand in Datuk Keramat and Bayan Lepas.

He said it was only natural for the two seats to be returned to Gerakan, but based on feedback, the MCA grassroots in the constituencies want to retain the seats and settle for a swap.

"Sometimes, they (MCA) behave more like the Opposition than the Opposition itself," said Chia.

But Penang MCA deputy chairman Datuk Koay Koa Hua disagreed. He claimed that MCA was treated like a third-class party in Penang.

"We can work together closely. I am confident any outstanding issues can be ironed out before the next general election," said Penang MCA chairman Wong Kam Hoong.

Chia, who defeated DAP strongman Lim Kit Siang in the 1999 general election, is more cautious.

He said MCA should resolve its internal problems first and not drag in Gerakan into its mess. This includes sorting out who among the MCA wakil rakyat hopefuls would contest in the next polls instead of asking for more seats.

But former MCA secretary-general Datuk Dr Tan Tiong Hong said as long as the top leaders of both parties were sincere in working together, the goodwill would trickle down to the grassroots.

However, he is optimistic that the old rivalry would not affect BN in the next general election.

Dr Tan, together with Keng Yaik and the late Tan Sri Alex Lee, was sacked from MCA in 1973 before he joined Gerakan. Dr Tan's highest position in Gerakan was deputy secretary-general before he rejoined MCA in 1981.

But for sure, as long as both parties remain competitors within BN to represent the Chinese community, hiccups in ties, like the annual Hungry Ghosts Festival, are sure to return.

Now, it will be up to MCA and Gerakan leaders to "exorcise" the demon long enough for BN to face the next general election.