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MCA leaders draw battle plans over probable vacancies in Cabinet

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Top MCA leaders are said to be planning to address probable vacancies in the Cabinet and party, following Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik's resignation as Transport Minister.

Leaders of Team A and Team B held a series of meetings independently, barely 72 hours after president Dr Ling's unanticipated announcement.

A source with Team B said that until Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad accepts Dr Ling's resignation, a status quo would prevail.

"If Dr Ling has it his way, he will certainly prefer a candidate from Team A to replace him in Cabinet. That being the case, the only person who comes to mind is MCA secretary-general Datuk Seri Dr Ting Chew Peh," he added.

Ting is former Housing and Local Government Minister.

The source pointed out that although by convention, ministerial candidates were recommended by the respective parties, the Barisan Nasional leadership could in this case "do what it felt was best for MCA and the coalition".

Another Team B leader said now as a crucial time for aspiring leaders and it was better to "strike when the iron is hot" but refused to elaborate.

Leaders aligned to Team A said Dr Ling's announcement on Tuesday had been blown out of proportion, as Dr Mahathir had clarified that he had not accepted the resignation yet.

"Everything will go on as usual. Dr Ling can remain as president until 2005," a Dr Ling-loyalist said.

It is learnt that Team A leaders were also keeping their options open in the event Dr Ling, when no longer in the Cabinet, face waning support from the party.

Then, there is the jostling for party positions as Dr Ling was not likely to stay beyond 2005, although there was speculation that he would leave even before that.

On Tuesday, Dr Ling, after the BN supreme council meeting, surprised the nation when he announced that he had tendered his resignation on Aug 15 last year to Dr Mahathir.

With the undated letter, it would be up to Dr Mahathir to accept and fix a date for the resignation.

Dr Mahathir yesterday confirmed having received the letter but had not accepted the resignation yet.

Dr Ling said he had yet to decide on the party post but would discuss the matter with party leaders.