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MCA should now take a deep breath and heal long-festering wounds

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IT seems that the curtains have finally come down on MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik.

After 17 years at the party's helm, Dr Ling's tenure had been one of mixed fortunes.

In fact, when he took over in 1986, it was at a time when the MCA had just come out of a leadership crisis which saw two of its presidents - Datuk Dr Neo Yee Pan and Tan Koon Swan - making ungracious exits.

Credit must be given to Dr Ling for managing the party well despite inheriting a mess.

Events shrouding the MCA and Dr Ling in the past few years had somehow eclipsed his earlier deeds.

Whether Dr Ling will have an illustrious mention in the MCA annals in the future is not a factor.

But it is obvious that his resignation will give his successors some breathing space to clean up the mess caused by the crisis which had been going on for more than two years.

The MCA crisis which split the party from the top right down to the grassroots saw the emergence of Team A, led by Dr Ling and Team B aligned to his deputy Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek.

Since the resignation involves both Dr Ling and Lim, the MCA not only lost its president but also its deputy president as well.

It had been repeatedly argued before that, if it was only Dr Ling who resigned and not Lim, it would have meant that the latter will automatically take over the presidency.

It would not have solved the problem because Team B would be in the driver's seat and Team A would be playing second fiddle.

Moreover, it is doubtful that Team A will be prepared to accept Lim or that Lim will trust those from Team A to work with him.

Similarly, if Lim had been the one to resign, leaving Dr Ling to continue as the president, it would have meant that Team B leaders would be left at the mercy of Team A.

It may sound ruthless but that is realpolitik.

There were critics who did not like the idea of both Dr Ling and Lim stepping down to solve the crisis.

This is especially when the "inheritors" are Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and Datuk Chan Kong Choy who are viewed as proteges of Dr Ling and Lim respectively.

To these critics, Ong and Chan will only be pursuing the Team A and Team B rivalry if not perpetuating it further.

Advocates of the solution, however, argued that however much Ong and Chan are aligned to the conflicting factions, they are not personally hostile to each other.

"They are rivals because one decided to support Dr Ling and the other Lim. The hostility is between Dr Ling and Lim.

"Furthermore, Team A and B existed because of Dr Ling and Lim.

"Take both of them out, Team A and B will cease to exist.

"If Ong or Chan tries to pursue factionalism, there is nothing much more to say about the MCA," a party insider said.

There had also been rumblings over the resignations by the MCA leaders and over the successors, with some party members alleging interference by Umno leaders, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in particular.

To Umno supporters such accusations were uncalled-for as it was Dr Ling and Lim themselves who had requested Dr Mahathir to intervene on their behalf to resolve the long-standing crisis.

With that, said one, Dr Mahathir came up with a peace formula which both Dr Ling and Lim had agreed to which finally ended in their resignations.

"You ask someone to help and he comes up with a solution and when it is pursued, you accuse him of interfering. That's truly not fair," said a staunch Umno supporter.

But such thoughts and contentions should be of the past.

The reason why there is so much hope that the MCA will resolve its crisis, at least among Barisan Nasional supporters, is very simple - the MCA is a senior partner in the coalition and if it is injured, the whole body is affected.

Secondly, the general election is due by 2004 and, if the MCA crisis is not resolved by now, such efforts by next year may be too late.

Finally, in terms of nation-building, the country cannot afford to have a party representing the Chinese interest in the Government being distracted by its internal crisis.

That will open the doors to other Chinese-based movements to fill the vacuum but the problem is, being groups from outside the BN, their representations may not be as effective as that of the MCA which is in the Government.

Another problem which had always afflicted injured political parties is to resort to primordial sentiments such as chauvinism and religion in order to continue to gain popularity among their supporters or those they represent.

Such illnesses are not peculiar to the MCA, but had also afflicted other political parties including Umno when they are weakened.

But much as the MCA seemed to be getting some room to breathe, all is not rosy and fine.

There is still the need for the new leaders succeeding Dr Ling and Lim to "legitimise" their inheritance.

But that shouldn't be much of a problem.

After all, while the drafters of the peace plan were working on the solution, other MCA thinkers had also prepared themselves on what to anticipate and how to deal with impending problems after the peace plan is concluded.

For one, the MCA election is scheduled for 2005. The successors can slug it out then and it would not affect the BN as it will be long after the general election.

That, however, is another phase which is a long way off.

In politics, one day can be too long.

For now, the MCA should enjoy the breathing space it had obtained. In fact, it should take a deep breath.

It will then discover how good it is to be alive.