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New era begins for party with departure of veterans

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - The exit of Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek from MCA politics and the subsequent elevation of their respective proteges - Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and Datuk Chan Kong Choy - will see the beginning of a new era of young leaders.

The change is expected to bring to an end the crisis in the second largest party in the Barisan Nasional. The first signs of dissension showed up as far back as 1999.

The problem started with the allocation of the party's four ministerial posts after the 1999 general election when president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik proposed Ong as a minister.

The other three were filled by Dr Ling himself (Transport) and vice-presidents Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn (Human Resources) and Datuk Chua Jui Meng (Health).

Supporters of deputy president Lim Ah Lek and Chan - both from Pahang - were dissatisfied that Chan did not get a full ministerial post although Dr Ling had promised to do so as far back as 1996.

Purportedly to make way for Deputy Finance Minister Chan, Dr Ling announced in May 2000 that he was willing to vacate his ministerial post.

There was vehement objection from party leaders and members, including Lim and Chan who had gone to see the Prime Minister asking him to reject the resignation.

Although Dr Ling retracted his resignation when he returned after a two-week holiday in Australia, the episode left a bitter taste, especially with Lim, Chan and their supporters.

In the aftermath, Dr Ling and Lim held succession talks but they broke down in February 2001 after a delegation headed by central committee member Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek appealed to Dr Ling not to resign - a move Lim described as an attempt to derail a smooth succession.

The split was aggravated with the MCA investment arm's decision to purchase Nanyang Press Holdings Bhd in May 2001 - a move criticised by the Chinese community.

It was in the run-up to the MCA June 24 extraordinary general meeting that the terms Team A and Team B gained popularity as previous fence-sitters like Datuk Chua Jui Meng made known their allegiance.

In the 40-member central committee, 32 were aligned to Team A headed by Dr Ling and eight to Team B led by Lim, although one from Team A later switched camps.

In the EGM, Team A won the stamp of approval to buy Nanyang Press Holdings by a mere 53.3 per cent vote while 46.2 per cent of the delegates voted against the deal.

Barely two months later, the MCA Youth annual general meeting was marred by a chair-throwing drama, a bomb hoax and physical and verbal assault by delegates. This led to the six-month suspension of the pro-Team B Youth central committee.

In early 2002 - a year scheduled for the triennial party elections - allegations of phantom members emerged with accusations that there were invalid names by the thousands in the party membership registry.

Dr Ling maintained that there was no wrongdoing and approached Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to cross-check the names against the National Registration Department database for confirmation.

A series of high-level talks were held between leaders of Team A and

Team B with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah to resolve the crisis.

On April 22 last year, after a Team A delegation met Dr Mahathir, Dr Ling announced at a Press conference that the nationwide divisional nominations on that day had been called off.

The following day, the peace plan brokered by the Prime Minister was announced where, among others, all elected office-bearers would be retained in a "no-contest" election.

The peace did not last long. Dr Ling was accused of renegeing on the peace plan by removing Lim as the disciplinary committee chairman.

Early this year, Dr Ling announced he had tendered an undated resignation letter to Dr Mahathir last August.

The announcement came in the light of accusations by his former ally, Datuk Soh Chee Wen, that Dr Ling had committed wrongdoings in office, including offering to sell classified documents to a foreign businessman.

Dr Ling's enemies in MCA then used that to ask him to step down as he did not rebut Soh's allegations.