

26/05/2003

New generation takes over

Tan Siok Choo

A NEW chapter has begun for the MCA. On Friday, the party's Central Committee elected Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and Datuk Chan Kong Choy as president and deputy president respectively, making the MCA the first Barisan Nasional party to hand over the leadership baton to the Merdeka generation.

To be sure, Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the Sarawak-based Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) president Datuk Amar Leo Moggie announced their intention to step down from the helm of their respective parties last year. However, this change-over will be formalised only in October and August respectively this year.

Coincidentally, both Ong and Chan share several traits. Both were born a few years before Merdeka, experienced poverty when young, studied in Tunku Abdul Rahman College and were teachers before venturing into politics.

However, both are different personalities with possibly a divergent political orientation. It remains to be seen whether the commonalities they share will help them meld their respective factions into a single unity, a unity that has eluded almost all MCA presidents since its establishment on Feb 27, 1949.

How quickly and successfully both leaders achieve party unity will determine the strength of the MCA and, by extension, that of the Barisan Nasional. Given the fact that a general election must be held before December 2004, achieving party unity is clearly their single most critical and urgent task.

As MCA president, Ong also faces two major mediumterm challenges: carving new as well as broader opportunities in education and business, the two heartland issues that any politician hoping to claim the mantle of leadership of the Malaysian Chinese community must define and defend successfully.

Against the backdrop of a globalised economy and the rise of China as an economic power, the challenge in education is to give added depth to the role of Mandarin and Chinese language schools in this country.

An upsurge of interest in learning Mandarin, coupled with the perception that Chinese language schools in this country excel in the teaching of science and mathematics, has prompted a steadily increasing number of parents - including parents of 63,000 Malay and Indian pupils - to enrol their children in these schools.

While a Chinese language education offers undoubted advantages, it is naive to believe that the ability of businessmen to capitalise on the tremendous opportunities China offers is based largely on a common ethnicity and the ability to speak Mandarin.

On the contrary, in their efforts to carve a niche in mainland China, I believe the two most useful attributes Malaysian Chinese possess are their multilingual ability and their success in coping with this country's New Economic Policy.

The ability to speak Mandarin and English fluently has given Mandarin-speaking Malaysian Chinese an added advantage over nationals from other East Asian countries. Many people from Hong Kong and Taiwan lack good English speaking skills while many Singaporeans, studying Mandarin as a second language, lack the fluency of their Malaysian Chinese Mandarin-speaking counterparts.

Moreover, as China attempts to transform its state-dominated economy to

a market-driven model, Malaysia's unique development strategy - a blend of state intervention coupled with reliance on market forces to achieve the NEP's strategic objectives - could offer some useful pointers.

Given their minority ownership status under the NEP, how Malaysian Chinese entrepreneurs adapted successfully in terms of profitability and scope of activity could be useful to China's businessmen as well as those managing state-owned enterprises.

As the world's fastest growing economy comes under increasing pressure to allow foreigners to assume majority control, the experience of Malaysian Chinese entrepreneurs suggests management control could be effectively separated from equity ownership.

Yet another medium-term challenge the Malaysian Chinese community faces is that of globalisation. Through the Internet, electronic commerce allows two or more parties in different localities and time zones to deal directly with each other. In other words, globalisation could well prove to be a process of disintermediation.

In a globalised economy, traditional intermediaries - including wholesalers, sundry shopkeepers, small retailers, stockbrokers, travel agents and real estate agents - could be by-passed. Since many Malaysian Chinese are involved as intermediaries in the Malaysian economy, in the medium-term they could face significantly reduced employment and business opportunities.

As a member of the Internet generation, Ong is well placed to make Malaysian Chinese businessmen aware of e-commerce's capacity to change the economic landscape and to warn them against becoming self-satisfied and complacent.

In a globalised economy, the pace of change could accelerate and past successes - including overcoming the May 13 riots and the worst economic downturn during the Asian currency crisis in 1998 - could well count for naught.

In overcoming these difficult challenges, Ong can count on two major advantages. First, the fact that he was educated in a Chinese school should enable him to forge better links with Chinese educationists and give him a better understanding of their concerns.

Additionally, his predecessor, Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik's record of achievement in widening educational opportunities for Malaysian Chinese - increasing significantly the intake of Tunku Abdul Rahman College and establishing Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) - is an added bonus for Ong.

Another advantage Ong enjoys is the almost total disarray in the DAP. Infighting in a key State like Selangor, together with the announcement by Penang DAP that it has no plans to launch another bid to capture the Chinese-dominated State suggests the Chinese-based Opposition party's ambitions in the next general election are likely to be necessarily modest.

Furthermore, Pas' speedy action in defusing the furore over the proposed demolition of a Chinese temple and the party's intermittent support for the Chinese educationists - the most recent example was the use of English to teach Science and Mathematics in Chinese-language schools - reflects its attempts to woo Malaysian Chinese voters. Hot button issues in the next general election are therefore less likely to be either racial or linguistic.

Given some of the strengths the MCA enjoys today, party members should thank Dr Ling and former deputy president Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek for effecting one of the smoothest and amicable leadership changes in the party's history.

Further down the road, if party members can maintain this amiability

behind the Press cameras and give their undivided support to Ong and Chan in the next general election, the MCA's performance as well as that of that Barisan Nasional could well reach a new high.

* Currently a Visiting Fellow at ISIS, the idiosyncratic opinions expressed in this article should not be attributed to any organisation she is linked with. schoo@isis.po.my