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What went wrong, Ling?

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IT is as if the enemies within the MCA are not enough for Dr Ling. He seems to want to even grapple with the media while walking the tight-rope of MCA's Team A and Team B divide.

"It is quite sad to see Dr Ling blaming our newspaper for things which went wrong in the MCA," said a senior New Straits Times editor who used to cover Dr Ling in his early years as the party president.

"When he took over the MCA presidency in 1986, we saw him as a voice of reason and that he would be a good leader to represent the Chinese community in promoting national integration."

What she said would be vouched for by most political writers and component partners in the Barisan Nasional.

A long time political observer pointed out that in the early years, Dr Ling had the trust of most Umno leaders as reflected in 1988 when Umno was deregistered.

Dr Ling became the acting BN chairman then, albeit only for a few hours.

Most Umno supporters, said the observer, though concerned about the fate of their party and its leadership in the coalition, were quite comfortable with Dr Ling taking the responsibilities of the BN chairmanship when Umno leaders did not have the legitimacy to do so.

"To most Malays, Dr Ling is perceived as one who did not carry any chauvinistic baggage unlike the perception they have towards some other Chinese leaders," said the observer.

Dr Ling indeed presents a benign face, soft spoken and never in a hurry to react to crisis. In many ways than not, he was accepted as a wise and reasonable leader, committed to the BN cause.

But what went wrong with Dr Ling, especially in the past couple of years?

His more vicious critics tend to use alleged business links of his sons as the reason. Such accusations are further given credence by the likes of businessman Datuk Soh Chee Wen.

Lesser critics will point out that Dr Ling made several miscalculations on his political moves, which led to him getting caught in the present situation.

"The whole thing, to me, started from the time when he resigned in May 2000 as the Transport Minister only to rescind his decision two weeks later.

"When he announced his resignation, it was made known that it was to accommodate (MCA vice-president Datuk Chan) Kong Choy, a protege of (MCA deputy president Datuk Seri Lim) Ah Lek who had by then given up his Government post and did not contest in the 1999 general election.

"Dr Ling then got the sympathy as it was then perceived he was prepared to sacrifice himself to fulfil a promise made to Lim," said one of the critics.

The move, he added, managed to neutralise Lim and Chan then.

"However, it did not make either or both of them fade away. In fact, the seeds of the Team B faction was sown then. A year later, Dr Ling started facing the full force of a fully-grown Team B."

It was in the June 24, 2001 extraordinary general meeting when the Team B faction showed their "power" of dissent.

In the EGM, held to pass a resolution to approve the party's investment arm Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd acquiring a 72.35 per cent controlling stake

in the Nanyang Press Holdings, Team A only mustered 53.3 per cent support from the delegates present, signalling the strength of Team B to be almost equal of Dr Lingled Team A.

By then, the schism between the factions in MCA seemed to be beyond redemption, leading to the request by the leaders of both factions, Dr Ling and Lim, to BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to intervene.

On April 13 last year, Dr Mahathir agreed to help resolve the crisis and with that the peace agenda was formulated. Two independent mediators, businessmen Tan Sri Lim Kok Wing and Tan Sri Lee Kim Yew, both chosen on the recommendations of Team A, were selected.

A memorandum on the agenda of peace was prepared based on recommendations from Dr Mahathir and on April 18, handed to the leaders of the two teams by deputy BN chairman Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was carrying out the responsibilities on behalf of Dr Mahathir who had already gone overseas.

The next day, Team B leaders announced that they had signed the memorandum but Team A and Dr Ling refused to do so.

Dr Ling had then contended that the memorandum was different and not the one proposed by Dr Mahathir when they met on April 13.

When Abdullah pointed out that what was in the memorandum was according to Dr Mahathir's wishes, Dr Ling refused to accept it and wanted Abdullah to show proof that what was contained in the memorandum was as instructed by the Prime Minister.

It was at this point that the peace formula proposed by Dr Mahathir looked set to be derailed, or its objectives unachievable.

In fact, when Dr Ling refused to sign the memorandum, snide remarks had already been made within MCA circles that the peace plan was an interference by Umno.

Remarks such as Mahathir Controlled Association, a spin to the acronym of the party, were being bandied about. It caused quite a stir among Umno leaders who felt that Team A and Dr Ling had undermined Dr Mahathir and Abdullah.

Senior aides of these leaders had then pointed out that it was unfair to hurl accusations of Umno trying to interfere in the MCA crisis when Dr Mahathir came up with the peace formula.

To them, it was the MCA leaders, from both factions, who came to Dr Mahathir for help and when he agreed to do so, Umno and him were accused of interfering.

By then, Dr Ling did not carry a benign face among some of the Umno supporters and the ordinary Malays.

If the issue over the peace formula had changed the perception of many towards Dr Ling's commitment to salvage the MCA, the party's inability to convince the Chinese community on Vision Schools and the use of English to teach Mathematics and Science, caused many to question his commitment towards BN.

While all these are in the past, they had contributed much to Dr Ling's credibility and efficacy as the president of a senior BN partner.

Now, comes the issue of the involvement of triads in the party which was raised by MCA Youth chief Datuk Ong Tee Keat who is aligned to Team B.

Whether Ong can prove it or not is one thing, but it has obviously ruffled feathers among the Team A.

While Dr Ling has his hands full dealing with dissenting leaders from within, he decided to accuse the NST of "naked, blatant distortion" in a report on money politics infiltrating the MCA which he purportedly made in Johor Baru on March 2.

His bone of contention was that he never said that money politics had reached the level of millions of ringgit as reported by the NST.

His clarification was carried by the NST the next day.

However, on March 26, again at a Press conference, Dr Ling decided to make the charge of "naked, blatant distortion" on the NST, and insisted that all the other newspapers got it right.

An NST reporter, who covers the MCA regularly, pointed out that it was unfair of Dr Ling to make such accusations when he nor his aides made any effort to clarify the Johor Baru story immediately after it was published on March 3.

Furthermore, he pointed out, it was not only the NST which carried the report. Two other newspapers, The Sun (using a Bernama report) and Utusan Malaysia carried reports along similar lines.

Said a colleague: "If Dr Ling or his aides want to believe there is an agenda in the NST, he should probably be more concerned about the Bernama report as it is a news agency owned by the Government which Dr Ling is very much a part of."

That being the case, it is quite surprising that Dr Ling had continued with his rampage against the NST which is not part of the Huaren stable. At the rate things are going, Dr Ling should be more concerned about what is going on within the MCA which is now threatening to drag the BN down together.

To this vice-president Chan said: "As a leader of a senior component party in the BN, one must be able to rise above personal concerns and instead think about the coalition which determines the direction of the nation. If not, the party suffers and with that, the BN."

The bottomline is that Dr Ling should stop grabbing at anything available, the NST included, to keep afloat. If he cannot control his party, he should stop blaming it on anyone or anything else than himself.

Blaming the tune if he can't dance will not get him his footing.