

## **Fact-check: Did Malaysia ever have non-Malay PM?**

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The renewed debate on the racial identity of who should be allowed to hold the prime ministerial position appears to have caused an old but intriguing claim to resurface.

The story goes that, in a brief moment of crisis, Malaysia had not one but two acting prime ministers in the past who were non-Malays.

In one claim that was circulated in blogs, content farms, and even Wikipedia, it was alleged that when Umno was deregistered in February 1988, control of the government fell on then-transport minister and MCA president Dr Ling Liong Sik until Umno was re-registered as a political party and could rejoin BN.

The other story starts with the death of Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman on Aug 2, 1973, while in office as deputy prime minister. Then prime minister Abdul Razak Hussein was abroad, so it was alleged that then-works minister and MIC president VT Sambanthan became acting prime minister for a day until Abdul Razak's return.

Malaysiakini's checks found the first story about Ling to be false, even though he did play a crucial role in the crisis. The other story about Sambanthan is harder to ascertain but appears to be at least plausible.

Newspapers published in February 1988 refer to Dr Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister, and Ling as transport minister or MCA president. There was no mention of Ling serving any temporary role as prime minister.

However, Ling did become BN chairperson briefly on Feb 16, 1988. This is unusual because the role is traditionally held by the Umno president even to this day.

New Straits Times reported on the following day's edition: "Barisan supreme council members elected MCA president Ling Liong Sik as chairperson. He chaired the first part of the meeting which accepted the new Umno as a member of the coalition.

"He gave up the chair after Mahathir was re-elected chairperson by the full council of 39 representatives from 13 parties."

The entire meeting to re-admit Umno into BN reportedly lasted an hour.

**'MCA saved the day'**

Another report in the previous day's edition quoted then MIC president S Samy Vellu explaining why Ling was the right person to be BN chairperson in that time of crisis, even though Samy holds a more senior cabinet position than Ling as works minister.

"The seniority of the party is more important than seniority in the cabinet," he was quoted as saying.

When contacted, former MCA vice-president Ti Lian Ker confirmed Ling had chaired the BN meeting to re-admit the newly re-registered Umno into BN but was never the acting prime minister.

This was because there was never a question of whether Mahathir had lost majority support in the Dewan Rakyat, so he continued to be the prime minister amid the crisis.

"MCA remained steadfast and loyal to the spirit of BN and held the fort when Umno was deregistered. Ling had averted a political crisis or chaos by his wisdom [...]"

"In other words, MCA had saved the day for Umno and the nation. Ling's decision had brought about the stability and harmony of not only Umno but the nation as well," he told Malaysiakini.

## **On Sambanthan**

Meanwhile, the claim that Sambanthan had been acting prime minister for a day following Ismail's death was carried in several reputable news sources, including in The Star's 2019 interview with his widow Uma Sambanthan.

The English-language daily reported as background for the story that: "Sambanthan held various ministerial portfolios: Labour (1955–57), Health (1957–59), Works, Posts and Telecommunications (1959–71) and National Unity (1972–74) and was even Acting Prime Minister for a day in August 1973 when Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak was at a conference in Canada and Deputy Prime Minister Tun Dr Ismail died."

Malaysiakini's checks did not find news articles from August 1973 about Sambanthan's brief premiership.

Nevertheless, a Canadian Press newswire published on Aug 7, 1973, about world leaders attending the 2nd Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting said, "Prime Minister Abdul Razak of Malaysia returned home last week after the death of the Malaysian deputy prime minister."

The meeting took place in Ottawa, Canada. This corroborates the claim that Abdul Razak was abroad when his deputy died of a sudden heart attack.

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