

Rotten fish head, messy legacies
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More than a week has passed since Ling Liong Sik (below, in striped shirt) was charged in court over the Port Klang Free Zone scandal. Of greater interest is that no major daily has come up with any commentary on the case that is worthy of mention, except for Utusan Malaysia and the Chinese-language Oriental Daily News (Oriental).

Utusan clearly has its own agenda, which is to project Najib Abdul Razak as having the necessary political will to combat graft. As for Oriental, there was no love lost between it and Ling, given that the MCA leadership was doing its utmost to block the newly-launched daily from getting a permit back in 2002, just a few months before Ling stepped down as party president.

NONEAfter the public outcry over the forced takeover of the Nanyang Press Holdings by the Chinese-based party the year before, Ling and his anointed successor Ong Ka Ting were concerned that Oriental might not be too friendly to them.

And one can write The Star off. Chua Soi Lek is deeply indebted to Ling for his political career, and will see to it that no critical analysis will find its way into the MCA-owned, best-selling English daily.

What about Sin Chew Daily that sells about 400,000 copies a day and boasts 1.2 million readers? The paper has been going around the Chinese-speaking world promoting itself as among 'the most trusted' broadsheets in Malaysia that would always 'uphold the principles of justice and fairness'. Recently, it also protested loudly against Tian Chua's threat of a boycott, claiming that such action would only hurt the reader's right to information.

But in the case of Ling, Sin Chew has said practically nothing on the possible ramifications for Malaysia. Even more absurd is the fact that the paper's coverage of the news last week was strewn with favourable comments by Ling's close associates, including Chor Chee Heung and Chua.

Sheer hypocrisy

Lest we forget, the PKFZ fiasco is probably the most explosive story in the country's history, with the eventual costs expected to swell to RM12 billion. Given that investigations have now moved into a new phase and Ling can proudly enter the 'Malaysia Book of Records' as the first person with a Tun-ship to be charged for criminal offence, is it not strange that the 'most influential' Chinese daily has failed to provide the public with more insight and analysis?

NONESin Chew may defend itself by arguing that since Ling's court case is pending, it would only do him an injustice by speculating further. I agree. After all, unproductive and sensational conjecture is the last thing that the reader deserves, but any major daily should not be so cautious and timid that it fails in its obligation to enlighten the public as to what the serious repercussions would be on public integrity and justice as a whole.

Of course, I am aware of the fundamental principle that one is considered innocent until proven guilty, and Sin Chew does have the right to protect Ling's image as it sees fit. But it is sheer hypocrisy, because this 'privilege' is not extended to Tee Boon Hock (above), a former councillor who was sacked last week by the DAP over graft allegations.

At last count, there have been at least five commentaries penned by Sin Chew's senior writers, plus an editorial touching specifically on Tee's alleged misconduct. None of these writings has, however, mentioned Ling, not even in passing.

As far as I can see, the very act of issuing a letter of support on the part of Ling does not differ much from what Tee is said to have done, and justice must be done if both are found guilty.

If so, what prompted Sin Chew's writers to comment with enthusiasm and indignity on Tee but keep quiet on Ling?

Emasculated Chinese press

I can only think of one reason - that Tiong Hiew King, the tycoon that not only controls Sin Chew but three other major Chinese dailies in the country, is the ultimate beneficiary of the MCA's takeover of Nanyang nearly a decade ago.

Reeling from the shock defeat in the Lunas by-election in late 1999, the then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad blamed Nanyang Siang Pau and the China Press – both under the Nanyang Press Holdings - for playing up sensitive issues that contributed to BN's loss in its stronghold. To punish them, Ling proposed the takeover bid which pleased Mahathir to the full.

chinese newspapers 250205Tiong, a native of Sibu, Sarawak, was even more delighted. By the 1990s, Sin Chew had grown increasingly circumspect due to Tiong's symbiotic relationship with both Umno and Abdul Taib Mahmud, but also that he could not (and cannot) afford to lose his lucrative logging business in his home state.

A weakened Nanyang Siang Pau would ensure greater circulation for Sin Chew as people shunned the MCA's mouthpiece. A perfect deal and win-win for all.

As it turned out, Nanyang Siang Pau, no longer trusted by the Chinese community, went on to incur unprecedented losses. It was eventually sold to Tiong in 2006, along with the China Press.

A new Chinese media giant by the name of Media Chinese International Limited was created, earning Tiong the nickname of 'Asia's Rupert Murdoch'. Little wonder that Sin Chew is now shrewd enough to shy away from critical comments on Ling's prosecution.

In retrospect, an emasculated Chinese press and the concentration of Chinese media ownership into the hands of one businessman are the twin legacies of Ling's 17-year tenure as MCA president, among his other misdeeds are many. Chua Soi Lek should do well to remember fish goes rotten by the head, and his 'sifu's' disgrace is just one case in point.

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