

Political dinosaur in the offing
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analysis "What do you wish to be remembered for in politics?" MCA president Ong Ka Ting was asked in an interview in October 2005 by The Sun.

The party president curtly replied, "Isn't that too premature?"

ijok by election last campaign night 280407 ong ka ting 02Ka Ting's answer was expected as he had just been elected party chief in August 2005 for another three-year term after taking the baton from Dr Ling Liong Sik in 2003.

His answer also explicitly implied a desire to carve into the party's history an extraordinary leadership legacy by establishing himself as undisputed leader, characterised by radical changes that no other president had achieved.

The March 8 polls results scattered Ka Ting's wishful dream and instead, he became the unwitting instrument of blame for his detractors, for bringing humiliation on MCA through the disastrous losses and a host of allegations questioning his competence.

MCA lost 25 parliamentary and 59 state seats to the opposition coalition. He now faces an uncertain future, amidst serious allegations that he has vested interests in positioning his brother Ka Chuan (now secretary-general) as his unquestionable successor.

The central committee met on Saturday with no signs of Ka Ting indicating that he would step down although it was agreed that party elections would go ahead next month at the branch level.

This was followed the next day by another briefing organised by the headquarters, comprising rank-and-file members. Again Ka Ting evaded 'touchy' questions by the press as to whether he would step down - he said the leadership would unite to revamp the party as soon as the causes of the electoral losses are identified.

Some opponents are now accusing Ka Ting of 'buying time' to prepare his defence in the October party polls and to strengthen his Ka Chuan's position by recommending him for a cabinet post.

chua jui meng and mca 030605At a recent press conference, former vice-president Chua Jui Meng (photo) urged Ka Ting to step down and allow his deputy Chan Kong Choy to act as interim president to facilitate the party elections as soon as possible.

"Ka Ting's decision not to take a ministerial post cannot offset his responsibility for the defeat in the elections, because people did not reject him as a minister but as a party president," Chua said.

Others have echoed the sentiments including former secretary-general Ting Chew Peh, Ipoh Timor division deputy chief Thong Fah Chong and Serdang divisional chief Yap Pian Hon.

Detractors accuse Ka Ting of desperately shoring up support for publicity's sake by calling the central committee meeting and the special briefing over the weekend.

Interestingly, in 2005 the same question had been posed to Ka Ting in an interview, on whether he was prepared to go if he loses in a party election.

He replied: "I believe in democracy (and fair elections). If truly more than half the members want you to go, then you should go. Holding a fair and democratic referendum is something that should be held as the supreme pillar of any electoral process. Otherwise, why bother calling for one at all?"

Ka Ting, whose favourite stunt is to project himself as the 'kampong boy with a bicycle', who has ascended to the highest post in a political party.

Never in his wildest imagination could have foreseen his leadership career being dealt such a crippling blow overnight.

Weakened position

The MCA has not only seen a devastating erosion of public confidence, but has also suffered a weakened position in government. Its only political consolation is to compare its losses against those of Umno, to divert attention from Ka Ting's weak leadership.

Political observers who have studied his campaign speeches say that these are often marked with over-confidence and arrogance, and are really off the mark.

Ill-advised by advisers, Ka Ting failed to take into account pertinent and critical issues that have been percolating particularly over the past two years. These caused a massive shift in the electorate mood against the Barisan Nasional (BN).

An academician said: "There was so much self-denial (by the MCA leadership) on the weaknesses of its senior (BN) partner Umno. Ka Ting's leadership also infuriated the Chinese community for its excessive patronage to Umno despite the latter's glaring dishonesty, lies and wrongdoing.

Added a voter: "Now they want to conduct a post-mortem, which is laughable because the issues (causes of their downfall) have been under their nose for the past two years or so."

The MCA spun propaganda through the newspapers it controls - Star and Chinese dailies - and spending extravagantly on print advertisements without effectively addressing the critical issues.

It adopted a stereotyped approach at ceramah by glorifying past achievements. The party homepage was littered with political character assassination of Opposition leaders like Tony Pua, Anwar Ibrahim and Teresa Kok, which contradicted Ka Ting's holier-than-thou accusation in Lobak (Negri Sembilan) that the opposition had engaged in dirty tricks because it lacked campaign ideas.

To a large majority in the Chinese community, Ka Ting's preaching of the mantra of a "healthy political culture" became pure hypocrisy.

Even general intimidation that a 'weak' MCA would not be able to serve the community failed to convince Chinese voters. To many, the party had started off the campaign with an air of arrogance but soon was 'begging' for votes. It was perceived to have lost its dignity

and credibility.

Political commentator Ooi Kee Beng in an article 'Political Change in Malaysia - Contextualising Reality' wrote: "Four years into Abdullah's mandate, the lack of policies for dealing with basic issues in a serious manner is now forcing 'subterranean' discontent to surface in open dissent."

Initially, many MCA grassroots leaders were not fully aware of the serious ramifications on the party's electoral losses. The reality is now sinking in.

mca new cabinet member 180308 ong ka chuanKa Chuan bitterly told the press on Sunday that party members who stabbed the leadership in the back during these difficult times would not be forgiven (referring to those who have defected to other parties), especially when the party regains its strength.

Some view such remarks as lacking magnanimity and compassion. They also ask if MCA has become 'private property' for the use of an exclusive few leaders, instead of a party representing all Chinese Malaysians?

"In great contrast, even Umno in its history has shown forgiveness to those who had harmed the party by allowing them to rejoin. But here we have a MCA leader who aspires to be a top leader, expressing bitterness against his own race," a branch leader said.

Non-Malay political leaders will no longer get away with being the only community representatives in government - they can now be bench-marked against their counterparts in the 'Barisan Rakyat' parties.

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