

**MCA : Ong-Chua showdown on the cards?**  
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**Beh Lih Yi**

exclusive What does former MCA vice-president Dr Chua Soi Lek's political future have in common with beauty contests? Timing, it appears.

With MCA to hold its triennial elections in October, a showdown is on the cards for the No 1 post held by Ong Ka Ting. However, his authority over the party has been shaken by its humiliating performance in last month's general election.

Whether Chua will be the one to challenge Ong is not something he is prepared to divulge immediately, despite being pressed repeatedly for a response in an exclusive hour-long interview in Petaling Jaya yesterday.

chua soi lek interview 020408 04 "It is just like joining a beauty contest - you may be the most beautiful lady in the world, but you can't offer yourself until the beauty contest opens (for entries).

"Otherwise you would be walking on the street, not on the catwalk. When the competition is on, then you can join," he said.

He said things will only get clearer after the divisional elections in July, citing a "fear culture" within the party to be openly seen as going against the top leader.

Wearing a yellow and blue striped short-sleeve shirt and accompanied by an aide, Chua exchanged name-cards at the start of the interview. He quipped that his was that of a "jobless man" as it does not bear the name or logo of any organisation.

Chua, 61, had abruptly quit all his party posts - and as health minister - in January, after a video tape was circulated of his sexual liaison with a "personal friend". He claimed that the secret recording and distribution of the video was politically motivated.

Should he decide to take on the president, he is all set to respond to any criticism that he has lost the moral ground over the scandal.

"If the fact is I can strip naked and tell people what I have done. I can face (any consequences)," said Chua, who is known for his forthrightness which sometimes comes across as arrogant.

Prior to the controversy, Chua - who enjoys staunch support in his home state of Johor and a potential threat to Ka Ting's position - was said to have fallen out with the MCA president. Both have denied the speculation.

chua soi lek interview 020408 05 Denying that they are political enemies, Chua said he "used to be Ka Ting's strongest supporter", even halting a 'peace plan' that would have made the latter's then rival, Chan Kong Choy, the president.

"During the Team A-Team B crisis, somebody said I had started it in Johor because part of the agreement was that Kong Choy should be the president, not Ka Ting," he revealed.

"I started the ball rolling by saying if the president and his deputy president (Dr Ling Liong Sik and Lim Ah Lek) wanted to retire, fine, but they should not determine for us who should be the new president and deputy."

The peace plan eventually saw Ling and Lim step down in favour of Ka Ting and Chan as No 1 and 2 respectively in May 2003.

### **'Phone calls, chit-chat'**

The MCA elections on Oct 18 is shaping up to a hotly-contested event following party's worst ever performance in the March 8 general election.

MCA won only 15 of 40 parliamentary seats and 31 of 90 state seats contested. The party had 31 parliamentary seats and 76 state seats after the 2004 general election.

Discontent has been growing with both the grassroots members and influential leaders pointing a finger at Ka Ting's decision to field new and unfamiliar faces as candidates as the main cause of the dismal showing.

ting chew pehchua jui meng 010605Vice-president Donald Lim and influential veterans Chua Jui Meng (left), Dr Ting Chew Peh (right) and Yap Pian Hon are among the critics. Many also view with trepidation an apparent plan by Ka Ting to make his elder brother, Ka Chuan, the top leader.

During the interview, Chua alleged that Ka Ting had chosen to focus on consolidating power and position by dropping those he (Ka Ting) did not favour.

He also appeared disgusted with the party's decision last week to name Ka Ting as the Johor chief - his post until his resignation. This is a key post as Johor has the highest number of central delegates and corresponding voting rights in the party polls.

ong ka ting and mcaClaiming that Ka Ting (photo) wants to be a "unchallengeable president", Chua said: "Everybody in the party knows he is a good strategist in terms of consolidating his position and getting political mileage out of any situation."

Asked if he is teaming up with disgruntled leaders to create a formidable force against Ka Ting's team, he conceded there have been "phone calls and chit-chat".

"But nobody have said that I should be their leader. So I can't be presumptuous that I am their leader. Maybe it's still early," he said.

Chua further said there have been attempts 'from the top' to prevent him from meeting party members and that grassroots leaders had been instructed to withdraw invitations to attend events.

"There are attempts to make me totally forgotten and become a footnote in the history of MCA," he claimed.