

MCA : changing fortunes of leaders
Malaysiakini.com
Apr 8, 2008
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analysis "Don't think I am joking," MCA president Ong Ka Ting told divisional delegates who had gathered at a hotel in Kangar for the Perlis party convention event in 2005.

chan kong choy resignation ong ka ting 100907 serious "I have stated many times that the MCA does not belong to any particular individual who feels that he can cling to power forever.

"If the delegates feel there is somebody else from within the party or even the Chinese community whom they think can perform better than me, then I am willing to give way."

This message was delivered during the run-up to the MCA elections in August that year, with Ka Ting only having held the reins for 26 months since May 23, 2003.

Interestingly, political observers are comparing the MCA's changing fortunes to that of an altruistic reminder taught by Chinese elders - that a successful business rarely survives longer than three generations.

Comparatively, less than three years since the 2005 party election reaffirming Ka Ting as the undisputable helmsman, his leadership follies have caused a drastic downturn in the party's fortunes.

If there is any consolation, Ka Ting could learn from French politician Herriot Edouard's observation that politics is like a racehorse. So, like a good jockey, Ka Ting must know how to tumble off with the least possible harm when the racehorse collapses.

Detractors in the rival camp are making their quiet rounds, questioning his leadership integrity, double standards in political appointments and high-handedness in party administration, among others.

Factional reformists are directing a more serious charge against him, expressing "no confidence" in his leadership or calling for "changing of the guard" in the political line-up. A 'Save MCA' campaign was launched in Ipoh on Sunday by his detractors, a reformist movement which will take its message nationwide.

umno 2007 pak lah abdullah ahmad badawi 061107 But like his Umno counterpart Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, he has refused to step down.

It is said that building a political image is like mixing cement. When it is wet, you can move it around and shape it. But at some point, it hardens and there is nothing you can do to reshape it.

Like hardened cement, too, words said cannot be withdrawn.

Ka Ting had pledged in the past: "Even I, as president, have to abide by the rules. When the time comes, leave with grace and your integrity intact," he said at an event inculcating a healthy political culture organised by Selangor MCA in 2006.

"Do not sulk, feign ignorance or make attempts to cling to the post. This is unfair to other potential leaders and disturbs party unity."

Huxley Thomas said of politics: "There is no sea more dangerous than the ocean of 'practical politics'. None in which there is more need of good pilots and of a single, unflinching purpose when the waves rise high."

Indeed, the rolling waves are high. MCA has never before being placed in a victimised position caused by its own fallible leadership.

Risks ahead

Even before delegates are elected for the Oct 18 party elections, many have questions about the future leadership - will Ka Ting defend his presidency and, if not, will his brother Ka Chuan contest the post?

If Ka Ting decides to re-contest, there is the risk that he could end up like a "Mexican air-conditioner", defined by British historian Deighton Len as "a politician making a lot of noise but who doesn't work very well".

Will Ka Ting be effective in winning back electoral support in the Pakatan Rakyat-held states where the party has lost the most seats?

barisan rakyat pas pkr dapThe strengthening of the 'multi-racial' Pakatan Rakyat (PR) can have adverse implications for MCA's political philosophy, if the latter remains a communal party.

Will current unhappiness about the 'Ong dynasty' hamper efforts to revamp the party towards greater strength and relevance in the new expanding political landscape (two-party system)?

Ka Ting's response to the Perak PR government's decision to issue permanent land titles to new villages was seen by some critics as illustrative of his impotency as a leader in Barisan Nasional.

"For donkey's years, the MCA could sometimes, if it was lucky, persuade the former BN Perak government to give TOL titles (not even permanent land titles) to some villagers or farmers. People can see the great contrast now," said businessman HK Lee, whose family still lives in a new village in the state.

Who's shouting now?

The aftermath of the 12th general election on March 8 continues to take its toll and reality is beginning to sink in.

For the first time, neither the president nor his deputy is in government. Never before has the party leadership suffered so much, losing the political opportunity in the appointment of local and executive councillors at district, municipal and state levels.

Some top leaders are beginning to sound more like opposition members. They talk of "monitoring" and "fulfilling promises" as if the party did not make any pledges during the

election campaign. In doing so, they have left their backyard unguarded.

mca new cabinet member 180308 ong ka chuan Before the general election, secretary general Ka Chuan had publicly chastised the opposition (for shouting), saying MCA gets things done without shouting.

“What is the use of shouting? The opposition does that. Did they ever secure results that way? Were more Chinese schools built because they shout louder?” he had asked.

Has the downturn in MCA’s political fortunes now forced its leaders to play the “shouting” role which they had previously condemned in opposition parties?

It came as a surprise when MCA Education bureau head Lee Seng Chooi made a public call for the open tender system in government projects - the party had been dead silent on such matters in the past.

Next, Ka Chuan announced that the cabinet would restructure or streamline policy changes on allocation of development funding to PR-controlled states through his housing and local government ministry. This was seen by some as a form of punishment, despite vague assurance that the delivery system would not burden the people.

malaysia general election vote ballot parties Ka Chuan also shouted that the Perak exco line-up is incomplete without a woman representative. Yet he faces an allegation that he had over-ruled the selection of a woman candidate in Perak, denying her the chance to contest in the Malim Mawar state seat (under the Kampar parliamentary seat) in the general election.

However, MCA is strangely silent over a land deal in Klang that is said to involve a senior party member, despite Ka Ting’s pledge to become more vocal in reacting to national issues.

The Malay Mail on April 11, 2005, in a report headlined ‘Klang land grab’ had exposed a controversial land deal affecting TOL holders in Kampung Perepat, Kapar. This allegedly involving “a senior member of MCA as well as a Terengganu political figure”.

According to press reports in May 2005, the matter was reported to have been resolved when the former Selangor exco decided to return the 17 land titles to the TOL holders and compensated the “senior MCA member”. The Klang land office also claimed that it had “wrongly” approved the controversial application.

Selangor Menteri Besar Abdul Khalid Ibrahim recently announced that all land deals approved by the former state government would be scrutinised and reviewed, specifically mentioning the land deal in Kapar.

‘Show business’

It is expected after the divisional elections, the chorus of voices will grow louder, demanding a change in top leadership.

Some party insiders said they would be conscientiously canvassing support from elected central delegates not to vote in “self-serving” and “un-dynamic” leaders.

"Top leaders lacking political wisdom, intuition and statesmanship should not be voted in," a central committee member said.

A party detractor who frequents karaoke sessions, sarcastically said that Ka Ting sounds like the lyrics of the Bee Gees' song: I started a joke (by promising to relinquish his post)which started the whole world crying. But I didn't see that the joke was on me, Oh no...

mca and djz and chinese crowdThe Chinese community and activists will be watching the coming party elections and the changing of the guard, if any, before rendering future moral support to the party.

A NGO leader who declined to be named rationalised that "if voters can vote for change, MCA delegates should also get this wake-up call".

As Winston Churchill once said: "Some leaders change their party for the sake of their principles, others their principles for the sake of the party."

As the BN's second-largest component party faces its moment of truth, a cynical political commentator summed up the situation: "MCA politics is just like show business. It had a hell of an opening in March, will coast for a while and then will face a hell of a close in October."

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