

MCA's Catch-22 political marriage (Part 1)
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analysis A typical and rather unkind public reaction to the MCA leadership today is one of bewilderment upon reading statements on contentious issues like pig farming, hudud law, open tenders, and federal allocations to state governments under Pakatan Rakyat administration.

ong ka ting and mcaThe leaders including president Ong Ka Ting seem to be floating the theory that injecting a little more boldness and 'oomph' might strategically help the party to recover credibility and popularity following its severe losses in the March 8 general election.

Instead, the electorate appears to be turned off.

Property developer YS Lee said such statements ring hollow and reveal an unnatural inclination among lackeys who are playing to the gallery.

"In good times, MCA might be seen as arrogant, self-reassuring and a strong supporter of the Umnoputra leadership even though the policies are bad, but not (these days)."

Ong's recent three-part interview with Malaysiakini reflected earnestness in projecting a "multi-racial" MCA and speaking out loud.

He is keen to reassure his supporters and perhaps the Chinese community that the MCA is ready to change or has changed. Yet, many ask if the "voices" are genuine or mere tactics to win back trust and respect that the party so often took for granted before.

Will Ong be able to pull off a feat that will show him in the portrait of a saviour rather than a leader trying desperately to conceal his party's true nature - as a partner in a vicious marriage with Umno.

Author RK Vasil in his article, 'Communalism and the Political Process in West Malaysia', succinctly wrote: "It started as an alliance of two communal organisations, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), both distrustful of each other. The two [...] had nothing in common, except their upper-class leadership."

alliance malaya perikatan 1950 210408 01It was the unexpected success of the joint effort in contesting the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections in February 1952 that saw the foundation of the Alliance being laid.

"The MCA, initially, because of its superior organisation and financial power at least secured an equal position with Umno in the Alliance. Also, as long as elections were held at the municipal level only, the MCA was able to assert equality with Umno," Vasil wrote.

"And beginning with this, the MCA got caught in a vicious circle; since the more it gave in to Umno, the more it lost support among the Chinese; and the smaller its base in the Chinese community, the less significant became its bargaining power with Umno in the Alliance."

His words of wisdom have lasted more than five decades, including this observation: "In

future, whether it was to make demands on behalf of the Chinese community, it was to be told by the Umno leaders (in the Alliance) ` how can you demand all these for the Chinese when you can't get their support? Deliver the Chinese votes (for the Alliance) and then make demands on their behalf'."

In fact, during the 1964 general election, Umno effectively used this argument to hold MCA demands in check.

Strategy that backfired

In the run-up to the March 8 elections, Umno did not check MCA demands. In fact, the Umno leadership was more than generous, showering financial allocations on Chinese schools.

Like newly-weds, leaders of both parties hugged one another and showed affection, all for electioneering.

The more disturbing aspects of the MCA-Umno political marriage revolve round the lack of sincerity, mutual respect, fairness and truthfulness, among others.

Pacifying an agitated and frustrated collective body of central delegates at the 54th MCA annual assembly last year, Ong soothingly said: "Do not be frustrated as these (grievances voiced by central delegates) are multi-racial problems. It took 250 years for the Americans to reform and Malaysia is only 50 years old.

"(Malaysian) Chinese going to the kampong feel safe; likewise, Malays visiting Chinese areas also feel safe. Chinese should not be made to feel like second-class citizens (by any quarter)."

najib abdullah 100408"Umno leaders' controversial statements do not represent the (stand of the) prime minister (Abdullah Badawi) and his deputy (Najib Abdul Razak). Confrontational politics (from MCA with Umno) cannot be effective; closed-door negotiations are more effective."

Defeat comes in many guises. On March 8, the results showed that without Malay electoral support, MCA "mixed" seats fell like pins in a bowling alley.

In a catch-22 scenario, it was an important feature of Umno's strategy to keep MCA weak enough (in terms of popular Chinese support) so as to make it dependent on Umno, but at the same time popular enough for the party to deliver the Chinese vote (for Umno candidates), Vasil argued.

In short, both Umno and MCA respectively fell short of their mutual political expectations, paving the way for their arch-rivals in PR to create an unexpected political landscape that is unrivalled in Malaysian history.