

MCA's Catch-22 political marriage (Part 2)
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analysis MCA president Ong Ka Ting confessed at his party's 54th annual general assembly last year: "We have to face the political reality. Umno is in power and it is calling the shots."

During the 12th general election campaign, he remarked that "MCA is the bodyguard of the Chinese community".

Guarding the community from whom and what, one is tempted to ask. Is it from racist elements or chauvinist segments of society or from extremist quarters within Umno politicking?

If the partnership between MCA and Umno is so perfect, why must MCA take on the role of bodyguard? Was the party leadership finally acknowledging the writing on the wall that its political master is primarily the principal catalyst for the erosion of political and economic power of the Chinese community?

It is said that if practical politics consist of ignoring facts, then political wisdom is indeed perishable. Unlike information or knowledge, wisdom cannot be stored in a computer or recorded in a book. Indeed, political wisdom does expire with each passing generation of leaders - as glaringly seen over the years since Independence in Umno, MCA and MIC leadership changes.

ong ka ting mca general assembly 280806When former MCA president Dr Ling Liong Sik transferred power to Ong Ka Ting (photo), under a 'peace plan' formula to resolve a long-running leadership tussle, the 'karmic seeds' were sown for another party crisis.

There were also high expectations within the Chinese community and hope that Umno's leadership succession from Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would usher in more favourable bargaining power for MCA. Unfortunately, that did not happen.

The relationship between MCA and Umno is best described by the former British Cabinet minister Cecil Parkinson, who said: "In politics, people give you what they think you deserve and deny you what they think you want."

MCA's current political predicament is compared to the Chinese saying about 'a person who is pursued by an army from behind and faces a steep-sided gorge in front'. The political escape route would be painful choice for the party, to say the least.

Would a MCA merger with Gerakan be feasible? Can the complexities of such a merger give form and substance to future reforms amidst Umno's uncertainty over its future political role?

Current demands

A more pertinent question is whether MCA's future can be secured within the socio-political fabric of a two-party system.

Its role as a communal party will increasingly be challenged or even regarded as contemptible, as more members of the younger generation embrace multi-racialism, and demands are made for democratic ethos, greater justice and fair play in the political culture.

malaysian chinese community people 170807 restaurantPolitics is still a numbers game. A dwindling Chinese population will impact on membership of the MCA. Of some 6 million Chinese Malaysians, MCA purportedly has some 1.3 million members aged between 18 and 25 years. This barely touches 3 percent of the community, indicating great difficulty in attracting younger Malaysians into the party.

Political realities are rapidly changing. Ong once said that "MCA members are like fish in the aquarium; if one fish defecates, all will die in the polluted water".

This may no longer holds true, says a political observer: "One can now get out of the water and join Pakatan Rakyat (PR), an alternative now offered in the two-party system. In the months ahead, membership defections from MCA could become a possibility.

Ong has noted that, for 58 years, the MCA has represented the Chinese - "otherwise who can help?"

barisan rakyat pas pkr dapOvernight, though, MCA's political vanity has been exposed. Permanent land titles and opportunities to build schools or places of worship have been readily approved by the PR governments in Penang, Perak and Selangor.

This has psychologically crippled the MCA leadership and the party has lost its legitimacy of representation. To avoid open confrontational politics with Umno, closed-door negotiations were held - but have these been effective?

There are more questions. Can MCA move the goal-posts in a game pre-determined by the Umno leadership? How will MCA react when Umno leaders play the racial card to regain Malay support? Can Umno bury the past or will MCA be buried in the process, as Umno moves to a new supremacy recovery platform?

There are deep-seated reasons for MCA central delegates to worry about the party's future. Its representation in government has weakened considerably, particularly in Parliament.

"If MCA leaders behave and talk like the opposition, we cannot lose to the DAP. We only need oratorical skills," Ong told the central delegates last year. For once, astute political observers agreed that, unless MCA bucks up, their future will lie in the opposition arena.

barisan nasionalThe emergence of a two-party system will exert greater pressure on Barisan Nasional's component parties to reform. In particular, this will affect the relationship between MCA and Umno, whose political marriage was strongly motivated by electoral victory and communal interests.

Murugesu Pathmanathan in an article entitled, 'Examining the validity of the two-party system in the Malaysian political scene'- based on the 1990 general election results which saw the eventual collapse of the Gagasan Rakyat and APU - concluded that a multi-party system is more conducive for Malaysia's multi-racial society.

Drawing a parallel with Britain's two-party system which had evolved over almost 300 years, he wrote: "While a two-party system maybe more appropriate and suitable to the political culture of Britain, the nature and conditions of the political environment of Malaysia

are quite different and have produced a different political system.”

The two-party system is no longer a hypothetical situation. The birth of PR has given Malaysians the first glimpse of an integrative approach towards harmonisation of differences in our society. Conscientious Malaysians hope it is only the beginning.

The March 8 election outcome has taught MCA politicians a lot. Things must be done by parties and not by persons using parties as tools.

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