

'Dirty tricks' in MCA electioneering
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analysis
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Being MCA president is not just about being top dog - in the case of the incumbent, Ong Ka Ting, it is about having total command over the party.

Cynics have described his use of the post as 'quasi-political power of tyranny'. Constitutionally, he is empowered to appoint loyal 'cronies' to various committees and executive positions at various levels in the political machinery.

ong ka ting mca general assembly 280806The president has accumulated power - legislative, executive and judiciary. He controls the executive, presidential or supreme council committee, the state and divisional chairpersons, and the machinery at the party headquarters.

When winning support is crucial, a president inclined to authoritarian rule usually exploits to his strategic advantage the human resources of headquarters to ensure logistical victory for his team of candidates.

The 36th American president once moaned: "Son, in politics, you've got to learn that, overnight, chicken shit can turn into chicken salad." Such is the power of the presidency.

In 'peaceful' times, when a party president is popular and well liked, everyone seems blind to any undemocratic principles that exist. But when there is a power tussle fuelled by an internal leadership crisis, everyone becomes suddenly sensitised to abuse of power, particularly by the president.

British historian Alan Clark (1928-1999) said this of politics: "There are no friends in politics. We are all sharks circling and waiting for traces of blood to appear in the waters."

Factionalism is fatal when the unifying characteristics of leaders are dishonesty, obfuscation and self-preservation. The more intense the rivalry within the party, the less accountability and fairness can be expected from the leadership.

Arbitrary rules are imposed to deliberately tilt the playing field in contests for posts. This may include a nomination system where a candidate is required to obtain support from 30 percent of party divisions, to qualify to contest the presidency.

Electioneering and campaigning through tactics like 'money politics' (or vote-buying), offering of political rewards (positions in the party and government), and creation of a 'political menu' (directives on bloc voting) amount to distorting equal opportunities for candidates.

Current MCA leaders have been accused of employing dirty tricks to purge the party of challengers in the upcoming elections.

Alleged clandestine activities include offering political rewards for voting support, manipulation of the membership roll, inserting 'phantom' members, lack of transparency in

approving branches, character assassination of political rivals by circulating poison-pen letters or circulars via SMS, and the creation of a 'snoop squad' to spy on rivals.

Phantoms in the party

In 1984, MCA went into crisis mode due to the power struggle between the factions aligned to Tan Koon Swan and Neo Yee Pan.

Ho Kin Chai in 'MCA - Leadership Under Siege', wrote: "Acting deputy president Mak Hon Kam in his capacity as disciplinary board [head] delivered the crucial blow by announcing the expulsion of 14 rebels. They included vice-president and imminent candidate for presidency Tan Koon Swan, Youth chairman Lee Kim Sai (deputy minister in Prime Minister's Department), central committee members Ling Liong Sik (deputy finance minister), Wong Mook Leong, Ng Cheng Kiat, Kee Yong Wee and Chan Teck Chan."

The Tan faction had discovered many 'phantom' members in the lists sent to the branches and division on March 14, 1984.

"Tan's group claimed that there were 70,000 to 120,000 phantom members. Translating these figures into voting strength, they meant 700 to 1,200 delegates representing fictitious members. The side (incumbent faction) which manufactured them would obviously be in an advantage to win the elections," Ho noted.

mca"For the first time in MCA history, the identity card numbers of Malays and Indians were used to forge membership. Fictitious Chinese names, false addresses and dates of birth were also invented to pad up the number of MCA membership."

(Under the MCA constitution then, for every 100 members a division could send a delegate to the general assembly).

Neo admitted that 'phantom members' had been with the party for about 20 years.

There is a need for a level playing field and adherence to a healthy political culture that respects fair procedures and fair play in elections. In short, delegates should be given democratic space to elect candidates in a transparent environment.

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