

MCA elections - the battle begins
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analysis During a recent discussion on the MCA leadership a political observer teasingly asked: "If (president) Ong Ka Ting had a chance to rub Aladdin's lamp, what do you think would be his wish for the party elections?"

It is a question that only Ong can answer, but there are clues from an interview he gave on June 15, 1999, before he became the anointed successor to Dr Ling Liong Sik in 2003.

ong ka ting and mca 140508Said Ong: "In a political race, those who reach the finish line are not the ones who started early or who led the field at the beginning; they are the ones who continue to advance courageously, who possess greater endurance and who manage to hold on to the end."

The MCA branch elections were concluded on Sunday. Of the 4,450 branches formed, only 4,295 held their annual assembly and conducted elections - there were contests for various posts in 179 branches.

Ten branches are suspended, while 11 have had their elections deferred due to disputes and are under the supervision of their respective state liaison committees.

The battle lines drawn at the branch level will be tested at divisional level before culminating in the national party polls in October.

In 2005, some 2,353 national delegates participated in the party polls. This year, it is estimated the number will hover around 2,400 delegates.

Of these, more than 100 will be automatic delegates comprising parliamentary members, senators, central committee and divisional chairmen.

Describing the branch elections, a senior party leader said: "A strong undercurrent is gathering momentum... particularly one of anger and resentment directed at certain individuals in the central leadership."

"This is due to juggling, manipulation and under-handed tactics over the membership master-list. There is alleged discriminatory approval of new branches (seen as aligned to some incumbent leaders) while delaying approvals for others (seen as opposing the president) and injection of phantom members (to boost the number of delegates) at branch level."

It was claimed that, in the Serdang division for example, 22 new branches aligned to the president's men were immediately approved, while six branches perceived to be supporting a rival camp have not been approved although applications were submitted six years ago.

'Deliberate disqualification'

There are also serious allegations that double standards are being practised, tilting the election playing field.

One claim is that applications submitted to the headquarters early last year have yet to be approved, while another is that branches have been declared 'invalid' for reasons unknown. In other cases, branches appear to have fallen short of the 50-member minimum, which disqualifies their participation in the elections.

donald lim and mca Vice-president Donald Lim Siang Chai - who was returned unopposed as Petaling Jaya (Section 8) branch head - summed up the situation in one interview: "I can interpret this as hidden hands deliberately disqualifying these branches from conducting elections."

Others who feel 'victims' share his view. A branch leader voiced a common plea: "There must be more transparency. There are too many 'yes' men in the MCA steering committee (for elections)."

Despite numerous complaints, some leaders believed to be supporting the 'Save MCA' campaign have won in the branch elections. This has given rise to some celebration because they have crossed the first hurdle.

chua jui meng 010605chua soi lek 030108 Former vice-president Chua Jui Meng (left) garnered 96 votes and won leadership of the Sungai Abong Tengah branch in Johor against his former divisional secretary Yap Mia Lee, by 33 votes. Another former vice-president Chua Soi Lek (right) also won as delegate at the Kg Benang branch in the same state.

There has been much harping on the need for reform and to strengthen the organisation under the banner of unity and effective representation. Despite this, recent allegations against those overseeing the election process suggest that leaders are merely giving lip-service to such ideals.

Among moderate grassroots leaders, the self-acclaimed democratic principles of the central leadership sound hollow for the lack of transparency and prejudice revealed in the approval of new members and branches.

"MCA is a democratic party as its constitution enables every delegate to vote as well as to contest any party post," Ong said at MCA's 56th anniversary celebrations in 2005.

Main casualties

But many question whether such democratic ideals are being undermined in order to orchestrate the 'numbers game'. Why is the game being played anyway?

"MCA has 1.3 million members and only 14.2 percent are below 30. The party is ageing and we need new and young blood. We are not comfortable with the figure. We have to balance the membership to reflect the party's strength," as Ong has said.

mca general assembly 2005 Today, MCA's official membership has dropped to some 1.1 million, after dubious membership records were erased in numerous verification exercises.

Playing the 'numbers game' to the hilt dictates the mindset of aspirants vying for higher posts. Forming new branches inevitably boosts support, and the largest groups of divisional delegates come from Selangor, Johor, Perak, Kuala Lumpur and Pahang.

It is in these states that branch and divisional elections are the most intense, and show the greatest tendency for the existence of 'phantom members'.

Ong acknowledged in a 2005 interview: "The MCA's greatest strength is in its established networking (branches) nationwide. Wherever there are Chinese, minus Sarawak, we have branches. So, we are quite well represented throughout the country...we have 56 years of history."

And for more than 50 years of MCA elections, the same major characteristics that have featured in the election process have been replayed over and again.

Apart from the popular 'election menu' (bloc voting), there are offers of 'political rewards'. Another allegation is that certain party leaders who hold government posts are generous in distributing development funds to schools and new villages to boost support for their local supporters contesting branch elections.

Although factional patronage and cliques threatens party unity, this is still exploited by certain top leaders to weaken rivals during party polls.

"They will speak in different tongues after the polls," a Kuala Lumpur branch leader lamented.

Nothing suggests that the situation will be any different this time around. The casualties are again likely to be fair play and a clean election.

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