

Passing of a patriot: 'The bridge that linked the parties'

24 Apr 2006

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New Straits Times

KUALA LUMPUR: Every year, MCA leaders celebrated Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba's birthday as faithfully as they do the party's anniversary.

This was in recognition of Ghafar's services to the party. Ghafar had stepped in to restore order in the MCA when it suffered a crisis in 1985.

"He was a fair and just man," said former MCA president Tan Koon Swan.

"He was given a job (to resolve the MCA crisis) and he did it well."

Tan was heading a faction that was on a collision course with another led by then acting president Datuk Neo Yee Pan.

Tan's faction was not happy about "phantom members" in the party, among other things. The situation got out of hand with public name-calling, resulting in the party's first extraordinary general meeting.

The then Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad instructed Ghafar, who was the BN secretary-general, to sort out the party's problems.

Tan Sri Lee Kim Sai, who was then Youth head, remembered how Ghafar would calmly listen to both factions.

"He carried out the party election in a fair and democratic way. He managed to resolve the MCA's problem in an amicable way," said Lee, who went on to be the party's deputy president and Labour Minister. Without Ghafar, Lee said, the crisis would have dragged on.

Wang Choon Wing, a former Federal Territory MCA organising secretary, said many members were thankful for Ghafar's involvement in resolving the stalemate.

"He was very nice. He would look at things objectively. Although I was a junior leader then, I understood how important it was for the problem to be quickly resolved," said Wang, the former national organising secretary.

Every year, a delegation of current and past leaders would visit Ghafar on his birthday. On Feb 18 this year, MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting celebrated Ghafar's 81st birthday in the intensive care unit of a private medical centre.

"Tun Ghafar is an example of a statesman who was close to the people and made numerous contributions to unite the multiracial community in the country," said Ong.

"His contributions to MCA were enormous and the party is very grateful for the role he played in stabilising the party."

Former MCA president Tun Dr Ling Liong Sik said: "We have never forgotten his great deeds for the MCA. He was also the bridge between Umno and MCA."