

Whither MCA?
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ANALYSIS, Oct 2 — MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek will need nerves of steel and an elephantine hide when he steps up to the podium today at the party's 58th annual general meeting.

At 62, the MCA is being written off as irrelevant by the ethnic group it was formed to protect and this weekend's AGM looks to be its last before national polls are called, likely to be as early as January next year.

The party sailed through the Election 2004, only to limp home with 15 seats out of 222 in the Dewan Rakyat in 2008 and 32 states seats, barely scraping 30 per cent of the Chinese votes, according to analysts.

But the worse has yet to come. That support has shrunk to an estimated 18 per cent as seen in the Tenang by-election earlier this year.

The hundreds of delegates may wear smiles for the cameras, as the Youth members did yesterday, but behind the closed doors of Dewan San Choon, the battle-weary veterans will be looking to Dr Chua (picture) to explain how he will lead the charge to ensure the Barisan Nasional (BN) co-founding party survives the likely stormy elections with such heavy baggage in tow.

The 64-year-old chief's sex-scandal past was dragged into the spotlight again Friday by no-less than his predecessor, Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat, whom he deposed in a fraught party election last year.

Ong bluntly told The Malaysian Insider that he did not think Dr Chua was "winnable candidate" material, and admitted the MCA faced a dearth of names to run in the coming polls.

Observers remember that the ruling coalition's second biggest party lost big in Election 2008 because the ethnic Chinese were fed-up with its failure to voice out their concerns despite being in government, highlighting the perpetuation of discriminatory economic policies that have led to a number of Chinese tycoons taking their businesses elsewhere.

This week's application for merger talks between investment banking group OSK Holdings Berhad — whose single biggest shareholder is Ong Leong Huat, 67, and ranked by Forbes magazine as Malaysia's 34th richest man — and RHB Capital Berhad has become the latest talking point.

Concern over where this trend is headed was sharpened by Permodalan Nasional Berhad's (PNB) bid on Tuesday to take over the nation's second-largest developer by market value, SP Setia.

Ong Tee Keat does not see Dr Chua as a "winnable candidate".
Sime Darby's recent acquisition of 30 per cent of property developer Eastern and Oriental

(E&O) for RM766 million from businessmen including Terry Tham Ka Hon has also sparked concerns and is now being investigated for alleged insider trading.

And before this, casino operator Genting started its Singapore operations two years ago while YTL Group made a S\$3.8 billion (RM9.1 billion) purchase in 2009 of the second-largest power generation company in the island republic, the 3,100-megawatt PowerSeraya.

And in 2007, Malaysia's richest man Tan Sri Robert Kuok also moved his palm oil operations out of Malaysia and listed them in Singapore in a move that was speculated to be caused by concerns over the government's continuation of Bumiputera equity policies.

"MCA is simply unable to protect the interest of the Chinese community," economist Darren Ng told The Malaysian Insider last week, adding strong anti-MCA sentiments were further amplified by its ministers' blatant corrupt practices and incompetence.

The decade-long RM12.5 billion Port Klang Free Zone (PKFZ) scandal, which has indicted two MCA transport ministers, including former president Tun Dr Ling Liong Sik and deputy, Tan Sri Chan Kong Choy, is probably the single biggest case that has bled the party of ethnic support and resulted in Malaysia's plunging rating on the corruption index and which plays a role in foreign investor confidence.

"With Chinese voters already having negative sentiments towards MCA, the move by the government to achieve greater Malay dominance will not be in favour of the Chinese political party," Ng said.

But the biggest indictment of MCA's powerlessness may perhaps be Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's recent whirlwind tour of Penang, the bastion of Chinese support under opposition DAP's control.

Rather than leave it to the fractured MCA, the BN boss took over the reins and led the charge for Chinese votes, spending last weekend dishing out RM15 million to Chinese schools and exempting a Community Chest project headed by Chinese tycoons from tax to help it channel RM100 million a year into vernacular education.

"Najib as BN chief is spearheading initiatives to win Chinese votes, triggering the question of 'where is MCA?' from the public," Dr Chua's party rival Ong Tee Keat told The Malaysian Insider this week.

A key member of Hua Zong, the association that represents the Chinese community, also shared that grassroots leaders no longer report to the MCA for help when they want something from the government.

Instead, they go straight to the minister in charge, said the man who declined to be named, and listed the highly controversial MRT plan as example.

"They now go to Nazri who is in charge of the whole project," he added, referring to Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz, noting the proposal to create country's biggest public transport facility has been plucked out from the transport minister's hands — traditionally held by an MCA leader — and dropped into an Umno leader's.

"MCA has lost its direction. There is no more pride in being an MCA member," said the source, who suggested that the party may recover if it found the answer to "how it is going to stay relevant" at this weekend's AGM.

He noted that MCA's ageing leadership at the top tier was disconnected to the growing group of young voters who no longer view the country through race-tinted glasses and were independent thinkers.

Political scientist James Chin, however, disagreed, saying the MCA had lost not just the battle but the war.

He said: "Whatever they do, it's too late. The MCA will never win in urban areas and that's where the Chinese votes are."

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