

The MCA finally speaks up, but is it no action, talk only?

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BY RITA JONG and TRINNA LEONG

During the time he was in power, former MCA president Tun Dr Ling Liong Sik had a favourite quip about political rivals DAP. He would say, "DAP is NATO - no action, talk only."

The DAP was no trouble for the MCA or the Barisan Nasional (BN) when Dr Ling led the party from 1986 to 2003. The then Transport Minister even briefly led BN when Umno was declared illegal in 1988.

Such was MCA's power and influence that the Chinese party did not have to raise its voice to get heard or impress its members and supporters. They supported BN even when a majority of Malays deserted the ruling coalition in 1999 after Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was sacked.

These days, the MCA is a bit different. It is out of government by choice after winning only seven parliament seats in Election 2013, less than half of the 15 won in Election 2008.

And MCA leaders have to speak up on various issues to be heard. From public university intake to primary school children having their recess in shower rooms - MCA leaders are now taking the government head on.

But is that just hot air to win back Chinese support or can the party ensure action is taken?

"In our minds, we never link that by us voicing out we would win votes. We just feel that people now want us to speak up. So what is wrong with that?" MCA Youth chief Datuk Dr Wee Ka Siong told The Malaysian Insider.

"This is a democratic society. We don't have to swallow as a whole every word coming out from the mouth of another component party in the BN coalition.

"If we feel it is wrong, we voice out," said the former deputy education minister, who remains one of seven MCA lawmakers in Parliament after Election 2013.

Wee's comments echo back to the time of then MCA deputy president Tan Sri Lee Kim Sai who rallied in 1987 against then Umno rising star Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who as education minister appointed non-Chinese educated teachers to Chinese schools.

Lee was stripped of his Selangor datukship or royal award as a result of that.

But Wee said MCA leaders have always had to negotiate and discuss privately to get things done in government, but the public views them as not doing anything.

Now, he said, they have to be heard or be irrelevant.

"We need to voice out and let the people judge. We need to find solutions. If the ruling party is doing the right thing, we give our full support. If we feel they are wrong, we say it.

"We have to find ways to disassociate with them when they make wrong comments. If not, our party would be punished. We have to be objective, practical and pragmatic," the

three-term Ayer Hitam MP said.

MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek was more succinct about the new found MCA voice after Election 2013.

"We criticise all the time when we feel it is wrong," he said in a text message to The Malaysian Insider.

But critics say the party founded in 1949 is now playing to the gallery to stay relevant after losing badly in the polls.

MCA member and former Subang Jaya state assemblyman Datuk Lee Hwa Beng believes the vocal strategy would not impress or win back the grassroots.

"It is one point to make statements on an issue, it is another to actually act on it," he told The Malaysian Insider, referring to the slew of statements coming from the party since the May 5 general elections.

"There is no point just talking. We want action," Lee said, adding that despite the stream of criticisms, MCA continues to remain in the BN coalition.

DAP strategist Liew Chin Tong said MCA's strategy was to find its relevance after being rejected in the past two general elections.

"They are playing a game. Umno says something, the MCA responds, to make them look like they are championing racial causes," he told The Malaysian Insider.

"By doing that, they want to strengthen their position, but this is not helping the country at all," he added.

Political analyst Dr Lim Teck Ghee said MCA leaders were just taking up issues to echo public concerns, adding "there is nothing new or extraordinary about their comments".

"In fact, many people see the MCA as still stifled in their response to the many controversies that have emerged after the elections.

"What is expected from any party that wants the respect of the public is substantive feedback and policy oriented suggestions that can make a difference in the way the country is governed, to ensure that mistakes are not repeated," he said.

Merdeka Centre director Ibrahim Suffian (pic) also echoed Dr Lim's sentiment that this was their way to re-establish their presence among voters.

"The party felt that the voters rejected them because they were not vocal enough toward the Umno government," said Ibrahim, adding that MCA still need to be more aggressive with their approach.

The respected pollster also said the party's impending polls later this year may also serve as a factor to push MCA's top brass to start polishing their public image.

"The incumbents would want to show that they are capable of defending their posts. This is posturing on their end since the senior leadership have not been free of criticisms.

"Even to its members, the party now looks weak after Umno took away several seats from the party during the elections. It gives the impression that MCA's top leaders cannot stand up to defend their seats within the coalition," Ibrahim told The Malaysian Insider.

In 2008, MCA contested in 40 parliamentary seats but the party only ran in 37 federal seats in Election 2013, a far cry from the days when it won more seats and just had to whisper to get things done. - August 5, 2013.

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