

MCA chief Liow thrust into unwelcome spotlight with MH17 tragedy

Malaysian Insider

July 21, 2014

Three weeks into his job as Malaysia's transport minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai (pic) was in Beijing to meet Chinese officials about the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 when an aide phoned to tell him another passenger plane had crashed.

Liow, a nutritionist by training, was a political appointee into a role that in normal times draws little – if any – international attention. This weekend he flew to Kiev and a geopolitical storm following the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine.

Thrust into the spotlight, Liow has been careful to stick to the facts – a trait he has shown throughout his political career, colleagues and friends say.

"He's calm and he gets his facts right. He wanted to get a clear overview of what happened, with that, he was cautious and consistent with his earlier statements," said Datuk Wee Ka Siong, Liow's right-hand man in the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) party.

Liow's peers paint a picture of a politically savvy man, who rose to the top of the MCA after in-fighting within the party leadership. The MCA is a junior partner in the Barisan Nasional coalition that has ruled Malaysia for nearly 60 years since independence, and is typically awarded the cabinet positions of health and transport.

The 53-year-old was previously health minister, a role in which the biggest controversy he faced was over disputed reports that police had shot tear gas into a hospital during a 2011 protest – an incident that didn't make international headlines.

Global audience

In his new role, Liow has been careful to avoid the mistakes made in the early days of the disappearance of flight MH370 in March, when company and government officials gave confusing, sometimes conflicting accounts of what had happened.

"He made sure that he was fully prepared" before his first press briefing on Friday, said a source who was present during internal meetings with Liow to organise the MH17 response.

"He knew that he represented Malaysia to a global audience, and that he would be grilled on issues that went beyond the press statement."

His first public statement came in the form of a tweet sent at 12.48am Malaysian time, after consulting with the airline and Malaysia's Department of Civil Aviation.

"I have received news on MH17. We are still investigating and will provide more details once we have them," he tweeted.

Even after US officials said their evidence showed the plane had been struck by a missile, Liow waited two days before acknowledging publicly that it had been shot down.

"We want the truth to this incident. As from all the sources coming back, the information coming to us, it appears that it was shot down," he said on Saturday.

Liow declined to be interviewed for this story.

His toughest moment before the international media came on Friday, when he was peppered with questions about why the airline chose to fly over a war zone in Ukraine. He repeatedly said that the airline had chosen a route widely used by other airlines and deemed safe by international authorities.

"When dealing with the media, he can struggle with ad hoc questions, so he works well with a script," said a politician who has had a working relationship with Liow.

For members of his party, a reliable vote-getter for the ruling coalition from Malaysia's ethnic Chinese minority, Liow's moment in the spotlight is a chance to show MCA is capable of leading in times of crisis.

"He knows the public will judge his performance here, to see whether MCA and him are justified to be in the Cabinet. So I believe he will do well," said Lee Hwa Beng, a former member of MCA's central committee.

Liow has been with MCA for more than three decades. His first job out of university was as a research assistant for a party think tank. From there, he became the personal assistant to the MCA's second-in-command.

He left for Kiev on Saturday night, leading a team of 133 delegates who hope to bring home the remains of perished Malaysians before the Muslim holiday of Aidilfitri next week.

"He may be transport minister, which is just a junior Cabinet position. But he's showing that he can represent Malaysia honestly and forcefully," said another government official. – Reuters, July 21, 2014.

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