

A jarring Gerakan note in the MCA ear

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Gerakan's frank approach to dealing with controversial issues has made MCA uneasy. CHOW KUM HOR looks at the parties' styles in handling touchy subjects.

ONE wisecrack making its rounds in Chinese political circles is that if there were a shouting match between MCA and Gerakan, the latter, despite being outnumbered four to one in terms of membership size, would win hands down.

The "joke" goes to show just how vocal Gerakan has been compared with its senior component party in the ruling coalition.

Not surprisingly, MCA members find more humiliation than humour in such jibes.

However, Gerakan has been perceived to be reflecting the people's, specifically the Chinese, sentiments on issues that excite them, while MCA's relative silence, to quote a Johor MCA leader, is "deafening".

One example is the recent Khairy Jamaluddin controversy. When the Umno Youth vice-head said non-Malay parties might take advantage of Umno if the party were split, Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik responded by saying he had no time for "low-class politics".

By contrast, the response from MCA, save for its Youth wing, was muted.

And when the Asian Strategic and Leadership Institute's (Asli) report on Bumiputera corporate equity ownership became a talking point, Gerakan became even more gung-ho.

Breaking with government protocol, Dr Lim asked the government to make public its methodology for calculating the distribution of shares.

The Energy, Water and Communications Minister was not the only Gerakan leader who pushed the envelope of what government leaders should or should not say in public.

Party central committee member Datuk Dr Toh Kin Woon said the Asli fallout could affect academic freedom in the country.

And what was MCA's response? Party leaders fell back on the all-too-familiar phrase: "We will discuss issues like these behind closed doors."

Gerakan's bravado in the Asli controversy may have earned the party points within the non-Bumiputera community.

However, it did not go down

well with some of Dr Lim's colleagues in government including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who felt Dr Lim's tone was a tad sarcastic.

Ong Kian Ming, a former think-tanker linked to Gerakan, said: "In any case, MCA's relative silence on this is giving room to accusations that it is not protecting the interests of non-Malays, specifically the Chinese."

He adds that the pressure on MCA to speak up is mounting following Chinese unhappiness over issues ranging from the economy to some Umno leaders' tendency to play to the Malay gallery.

But the reality is that speaking up is not always the most viable option, which explains MCA's reserve. Says Rita Sim, the deputy chairman of Institute of Strategic Analysis and Policy Research, an MCA think-tank: "It is just like when the opposition makes a lot of noise asking for all sorts of things. The government cannot be seen to be giving in to their demands. The same concept applies in BN."

"We (MCA) do it more quietly. At the end of the day, what matters are results, not noise. Sometimes, it is best not to speak," adds Sim.

In other words, while thumping tables to get a message across may make one look like a hero, it might not work, or

worse, might aggravate the situation.

At the grassroots, MCA is not comfortable with the media attention Gerakan is getting for airing issues affecting the Chinese community.

One Selangor MCA Youth leader says Gerakan has the edge of having a soon-to-retire president, Dr Lim, who will quit his party post next April, has the latitude to speak his mind without having to worry too much about his political future, or so the argument goes.

In spite of the uneasiness, Sim says the last thing MCA wants is to engage Gerakan in one-upmanship. "Both parties are looking at the bigger picture. MCA is just as concerned about Malay poverty as it is about Chinese poverty. We want to work together."

Even Gerakan Youth chief Datuk Mah Siew Keong concurs that going overboard to drum up protest can be counterproductive. In a multi-racial country with no shortage of racial champions, he says the only place to discuss contentious issues is behind closed doors.

One such forum is the National Economic Consultative Council (NECC), made up of representatives from political parties and interest groups.

NECC I provided input for post-1990 economic strategies to replace the New Economic Policy. NECC II helped draft the country's 10-year economic blueprint, the National Vision Policy, which was launched in 2000.

MCA central committee member Datin Paduka Dr Tan Yee Kew, who sat in both NECCs, says closed-door meetings are the best way to resolve contentious issues.

"During meetings, there were heated arguments at the drafting (of the recommendations) stage. We went over again and again how the sentences should be phrased. We argued over the selection of words."

"What we wanted in the end was consensus, one that was agreeable to all sides. This could not have taken place if the arguments were taking place in public or through the Press," says Tan, who is now In-

ternational Trade and Industries Ministry parliamentary secretary.

Although both councils came to agreement, she says some members were disappointed the government did not implement all the recommendations.

Despite several calls to set up the NECC III, the government has not indicated when it will be set up although MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, in his Deepavali message, said it was in the pipeline.

Still, sometimes it is useful to raise the volume on issues, especially non-sensitive ones that cannot wait for closed-door meetings to convene.

Ong Kian Ming says one example is MCA vice-president Datuk Ong Tee Keat's recent outburst over the alleged misuse of a school's renovation funds.

"You help generate publicity, hope for action and then draw back when the temperature gets too hot," he adds.

But where do politicians draw the line on when to give headline-grabbing soundbites and when to keep journalists at arm's length?

Mah says there is no hard-and-fast rule as each issue is unique and timing is also important.

However, some politicians have resorted to using the "middle ground". Ong explains the *modus operandi*: First, get younger leaders (like those from the Youth wing) to speak up on issues.

When things get a bit too hot, senior party leaders step in, clarify to the grassroots, force a closed-door meeting and hopefully reach a settlement all sides can agree on.

This is hardly a new tactic as it has been used by Umno and MCA.

"A more rational response is to approach issues with facts and logic instead of playing up racial sentiments. But in this country, it is easier said than done," adds Ong.

It is for this reason that MCA and Gerakan have to learn to overcome their impulse to call Press conferences. Making their way to closed-door meetings can be more fruitful.

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