

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL... ALREADY

Still a good nine months away, the MIC's general election is already starting to hot up, with party President Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu firing the first salvo in the form of accusing his deputy of waging a 'proxy war' against him. How things shape up from here would be worth noting.

By Habhajan Singh

THE WAR never ended,' says a leader of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) on the less-than-cordial relationship between the party's top-two leaders.

One thing is for sure though. In the MIC, the party's President, Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu, and Deputy President, Datuk S Subramaniam, do not see eye to eye. Both are silently nursing the wounds obtained

from the gut-wrenching battle for the party's presidency in 1989.

The most recent blast came on the morning of Sept 8, after Samy Vellu had returned from a trip to India. After officiating a temple in Puchong, Selangor, he launched a scathing attack on his deputy, accusing him of staging a 'proxy war'. 'He has been waging this silent campaign all this while through the *Malaysian Nanban* newspaper which was

owned by his close friend,' Samy Vellu told reporters. Days before that, daily newspapers, fresh from covering the bruising Gerakan leadership contest, began to turn their attention to the MIC.

In typical Samy Vellu style, he ended the press conference with an abrupt 'OK-lah. I have to go now. You have spoilt my mood. I had a very good morning today'.

Well, he can expect a few more 'mood spoilt' days ahead, although not that soon.

ALREADY

The election for the party's office bearers is a good nine months away.

In the now-amended constitution, the fight for the presidency will be held a couple of months before the annual assembly. Hence, Samy Vellu's position is up for grabs somewhere between February and June next year.

But aspirants need to clear one hurdle. This is apart from being armed with a heat shield to withstand Samy Vellu's verbal

blasts. Taking the cue from Umno, MIC has put in place a minimum threshold system for anyone vying for the top position. A contender needs 50 nominations, each bearing the signature of one proposer and five seconders, all of whom must be branch chairmen.

So, to begin with, you need 300 branch leaders out in the open backing you. With 3,960 branches, one would imagine that this should not be too much of a problem. Well, not if your opponent is the 26-year-term president himself.

'Who wants to come out clean and say I support Subra?' asks one branch leader.

Following the 1989 battle for the top post, say party insiders, Samy Vellu went on a 'cleansing' spree, closing down branches supportive of his opponents.

Fear and awe

At work is the fear factor as well as the awe factor. In private, party leaders readily admit to Samy Vellu's iron-fisted, no-nonsense brand of leadership.

Some see no problems with it in the name of keeping the party united. 'For a



Samy:
Seasoned politician who wields an iron fist

THE NEXT BIG THING?

Datuk S Sothinathan, the MIC secretary-general, has been touted as a party leader in the making. We get his views.

DATUK S Sothinathan, an understudy of Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu, is seen by some as a leader in the making.

The MIC Secretary-General seems to be in no hurry though, probably as a form of acknowledging the presence of more seasoned party leaders around him. Sothinathan only came onto the political scene in 1999 when Works Minister Samy Vellu handpicked him to be his press secretary.

'It came out of the blue. I was planning to open up my own law practice when the offer came,' he says.

'I had always been on the fringes of the political arena, but little did I expect that I would be deeply involved in it.'

Sothinathan was no stranger to Samy Vellu. He was the executive secretary of the Koperasi Pekerja Jaya chaired by the latter.

His rise has been pretty meteoric. His break came in 2000 when he was chosen as a candidate in the Teluk Kemang parliamentary by-election. He won, and was soon appointed as the Negeri Sembilan MIC head and given a seat in the party's central working committee.

Later that year, Samy Vellu entrusted him with the position of party secretary-general, providing him with an avenue to broaden and deepen his network.

In the run-up to the MIC elections next year, Sothinathan's name is being bandied

around as a potential candidate for the vice-presidency.

'I have nothing to say on that at this moment,' he tells *Malaysian Business* when met recently.

Excerpts from the interview:

As secretary-general, you are an integral part of the party machinery. What is the state of the MIC at the moment?

At one time, it was seen only as a political party. Today, it is also seen as a socio-economic vehicle for the community. The community realises the important role played by the MIC. It's a political engine to translate our ideas and aspirations into action.

The party has grown by leaps and bounds. Today, it has 600,000 members. We have an administrative system on par, or better, than other political parties. We're one of the few parties that constantly conduct activities for the betterment of the community – social and political. We run many programmes for school-goers, creating awareness for school-leavers. We even get involved in looking for placement for students in higher educational institutions. We are deep into it. We run neighbourhood programmes. During festive seasons, we organise games for them.

When there's a fire, MIC is the first to be there, offering help, especially in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor.

What are the main concerns dominating the party?

The two major issues are educational and economic opportunities.

Although we have progressed, we've still been left behind, in relative terms. If we can tackle these two issues, then the other issues will be ancillary to them.

As secretary-general, what would you list as some of your contributions to the party and its members?

I've been able to fit in well in the organisation and have contributed effectively towards objectives and policies. With the Government, we have been able to put across the concerns of the Indian community. Indians cannot be categorised as just an ordinary group. The Government agrees that there are problems peculiar to the Indian community, be they economic or social, that need to be addressed.

What are your main concerns as far as the Indian community is concerned?

It has to undergo a change in mindset. We need to learn to be independent, work hard and be wise. This is where, generally, the Indians lag behind. Sometimes, they work hard but are not wise enough. You work day and night, but do not earn enough. Why go for low-paying jobs? Opportunities are abundant in Malaysia. Also, many of them are risk averse.

Has the MIC played an effective role within the Barisan Nasional Government?

MIC is the only party representing the Indians in the Government.



Sothinathan:
Samy Vellu has been my mentor

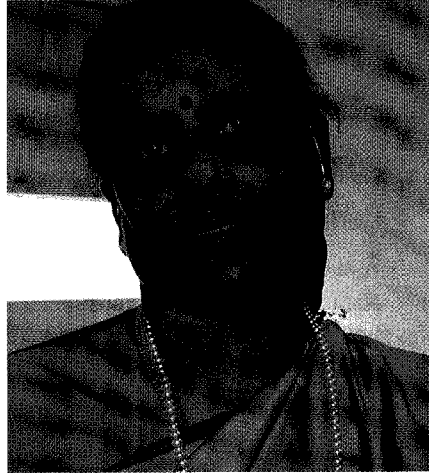
party like this, you need a firm hand to maintain discipline and forge ahead in unison,' says MIC Wanita Chief Senator Datin Paduka Jaya Partiban, a seasoned MIC leader who had earlier served as the women's wing secretary for 13 years.

At the same time, some are also fast to acknowledge Samy Vellu's strength: tireless party and community work, and a willingness to stand up for the community.

'I've always admired him for his hard work and commitment. I admire his guts, courage and determination,' MIC Secretary-General Datuk S Sothinathan tells *Malaysian Business*. In fact, the Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Environment readily admits that Samy Vellu is his mentor.

From its beginnings as a political party, Sothinathan says the 600,000 member-strong MIC has today transformed itself into a socio-economic and political vehicle for the community. 'The community realises the important role played by MIC. It's a political engine to translate our ideas and aspirations into action,' he says

In all likelihood, Samy Vellu will sail



Jaya: *For a party like this, you need a firm hand to maintain discipline and forge ahead in unison*

through uncontested. The day after Samy Vellu's 'proxy war' outburst, Subramaniam took a conciliatory approach instead, pledging his support to the president.

'I challenged Samy Vellu for the president's post in 1989 because there was a difference in opinion,' Subramaniam told reporters. 'I was defeated and I accepted the defeat. Thereafter, I was

elected as deputy president and we worked together.'

The word is that Samy Vellu will name MIC Vice-President Datuk G Palanivel as the candidate to take on Subramaniam for the number two post. Sothinathan, his blue-eyed boy, will then run for the vice presidency, together with incumbents Datuk S Veerasingam and Tan Sri K S Nijhar.

At the third-tier level of the vice-presidency, other names that have popped up include Federal Territory MIC Chairman Datuk V K K Thiagarajan and Johor MIC Vice-Chairman Datuk S Krishinasamy. But it takes much more than popular support to break through the ranks and burst into the top leadership.

'It does not matter what they bring to the table. In the end, Samy Vellu decides,' says a party leader.

With some three decades of experience in political manoeuvring, it will be interesting to see how Samy Vellu handles the matter, possibly a prelude to his succession planning. MIC is certainly headed for interesting times. **mb**