

FIGHT TO THE FINISH

Can incumbent Datuk S Subramaniam retain his MIC deputy presidency in the coming party polls?

By Charles Raj and S Jai Shankar

A BATTLE royale is brewing in the fight for the deputy presidency of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). And whichever way you look at it, the fight is going to be one of the most bruising in the history of the party. But what is peculiar about this fight is that Vice-President Datuk G Palanivel has yet to announce that he is taking on incumbent Datuk S Subramaniam.

'If this contest happens, it should be more about who is the best person to lead the community and the party rather than about the individuals involved,' says Palanivel when asked if he was confident of winning the deputy president's post against incumbent Subramaniam in the coming June party elections. The almost coy answer is probably expected, considering that at the point of the interview, he had not yet declared his willingness to go for the post, although it had been made clear that it was not the candidacy which was in question but the timing of the announcement.

But then, the response was also typical of Palanivel's personality and political style.

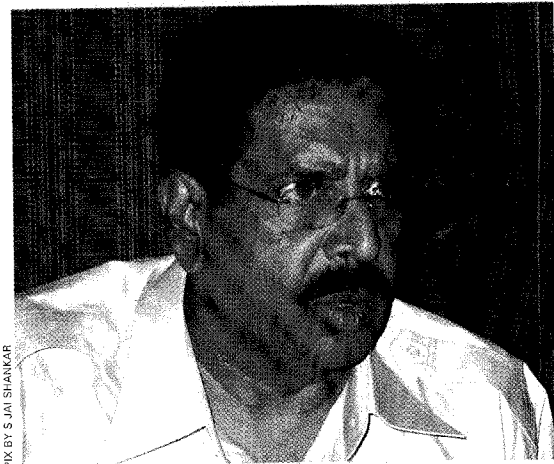
The Penangite carefully cultivates an air of respectability and decorum although personal communication with him does reveal a strong character with a mind of his own. And being a historian by training, his worldview and strategic directions are seemingly dictated by a touch of historical reality. In fact, the 57-year-old explains the decision to postpone the announcement by pointing out that in the past, early announcements have always been trailed by increased tension among party members as open politicking and vote canvassing becomes aggressive. He definitely has a point. Previous battles that involved MIC's bigwigs have always been volatile. But the delay in announcing should in no way distract the public from the strong undercurrents that are already building up on the ground. Already, there are accusations of money politics and political intimidation from both camps.

A heated battle should be expected as the jostling for the Number Two position is seen by most observers as a proxy battle

TRYING TO BECOME HIS OWN MAN

Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu's protégé Datuk G Palanivel gets into the fray.

MALAYSIAN Indian Congress (MIC) Vice-President Datuk G Palanivel is certainly an enigma. He might not be the most charismatic politician around, but he has through various means ensured his strength in the party. Being known as the president's man has certainly not harmed him in any way. And this is his first big fight within the party. It remains to be seen if he can walk away with a victory despite the open support from the president and MIC Youth. He says that this is a challenge he relishes. It could be an interesting story of either the rise of a new leader in the party or the crushing of a potential poster boy. *Malaysian Business* caught up with him for a chat recently. Excerpts:



PIX BY S JAI SHANKAR

How would you describe your relationship with Datuk Subramaniam?

Relatively good. We have known each other since the late 1960s when he was the hostel manager at the PPPN Hostel in Petaling Jaya. I was then pursuing my basic degree in University Malaya. In fact, Subramaniam was once my tutor. And I was also involved in helping out in his election campaigns in the 1970s.

How would the community benefit if you become the Number Two in MIC?

Firstly, I do not wish to stress too much on the position. But in general terms, it will be good for the president to have candidates who he is comfortable with. The president must be able to work closely with his deputy. That will make the MIC machinery tick better and benefit the Indian community immensely. Furthermore, if I announce my candidacy, then it will be because, among others, I have come to believe that I need to give others in the party a chance to move up. I can stay put in my position for a long time because I believe I have the requisite support within the party. However, if I choose to remain for another term or longer as a vice-president, it will scuttle the mobility among other aspiring and dynamic candidates within the party. Sometimes, change is a necessary part of the democratic process.

Do you have a specific manifesto when you announce the candidacy?

No, I don't intend to have a specific manifesto. However, I will like to focus my energy and resources on especially helping the lower 30% of the Malaysian Indian community. The need is great for them to improve their standard of living. We must do the necessary to help them, especially since their level of motivation is very low. I have already started on this through a series of projects, including under the *Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia* (AIM) programme, which provides micro-credit facilities to single mothers and needy segments of the community. It has already benefited more than 800 Indian families.

What are your achievements as a leader of the Indian community?

I would not say what I do are achievements. We do what is necessary. A lot of my contributions are through my ministry. But I make it a point to ensure that Indians benefit from government help because these resources are meant to be used by all Malaysians irrespective of race or religion. A good example is the AIM project. Before I was involved in the project, the Indian community was not benefiting much from it. I managed to change this and ensure that the programme supports Indians. I also distribute key information on opportunities and resources that can benefit Indians to about 5,000 people in my database. They, in return, will disseminate this information further down. My key message is that Indians need to learn to tap into government resources, especially if financially weak Indian families want to break free from

between the current MIC President Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu and his deputy – perpetuating a rivalry that took root in the late 1970s. To others, it is a battle between a seemingly fading force intending to retain his status quo and an emerging player gunning for change. In Subramaniam, the MIC delegates have seen the alternative face of MIC for more than two decades. A charming character, the Perak-born was groomed by the-then MIC President Tan Sri V Manickavasagam to head the movement in the 1970s. But things didn't turn out that way largely due to Subramaniam's shock defeat to the-then up-and-coming Samy Vellu for the MIC vice-presidency in the mid-1970s by 26 votes. The 62-year-old was then the secretary-general of MIC. Since then, his influence in the party vis-a-vis Samy Vellu's has been dwindling steadily.

In contrast, Palanivel is best characterised as a renaissance man – a personality who has reinvented himself consistently and who has had a quixotic mix of careers that include stints as an academician, consumer advocate, journalist and full-time politician. His political career since first becoming a member in 1968 has been relatively

smooth. It really took off when Samy Vellu began to use him as a speechwriter in the early 1980s. Palanivel later became Samy Vellu's press secretary in 1987 before becoming the Member of Parliament for the Hulu Selangor constituency in 1990.

Cold war

'Expect the cold war to end quickly once the candidates and Samy Vellu start ground-level politicking,' says one insider on how fractious the battle is likely to be. Things will really heat up once the party holds its state conventions beginning next month when the collective will of the 4,300 branches and 143 MIC divisions will come into play through proxy votes. The fact is both candidates are going for broke. In the case of Subramaniam, a loss could very well mean the end of an active role in MIC politics. In the case of Palanivel, a loss could mean a death knell to any ambitions of eventually taking over Samy Vellu's position in the party, although it is likely that he could still retain a position of influence both in MIC and within the government due to Samy Vellu's patronage. A nominated position as secretary-general is a possibility. Both, however, appear nonchalant about a possible defeat.

the vicious cycle of poverty. I have also made sure millions of ringgit are distributed to needy Indians through various projects. For example, between April 2004 and September 2005, my office handled hundreds of welfare-related cases and has disbursed about RM834,300. Most of these are through the voluntary social service operation that I operate from my office every Sunday. I have also worked hard to ensure that the district level welfare departments (*Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat Daerah*) disburse substantial amounts to help Indians. For example, between April 2004 and September 2005, these welfare departments disbursed a total of RM16.5 million for 16,950 cases.

What are your views on the Ninth Malaysia Plan?

MIC can and should work very hard to eradicate a host of socio-economic problems afflicting Indians and every other Malaysian with the help of the government. There are various areas that need to be looked into, from poverty, environmental degradation, health issues and

such. The Ninth Malaysia Plan has something for all but overall, its thrust is on poverty eradication. It is a good plan based on that context. But the most important thing the government needs to be aware of is that people are its greatest capital and wealth. As such, MIC intends to play its part to strengthen the poor among the community to ensure that they are able to generate wealth for themselves as well as the nation. Family units, for example, form one of the smallest elements of society, but they are also the building blocks. We feel that the government should take cognisance of this and help initiate development work towards this end. I ensure this happens in my ministry as we work on a very deep level to ensure that families on the ground truly benefit from government resources. I always ensure I take the government programmes to the grassroots. But on our part, we need to ensure that Indians are equipped to grab opportunities when it comes to them. To ensure this happens, we need to have a proper mechanism that is able to identify the group that is in need and have the right delivery system to serve them.

Palanivel says it will take more than a political election to waylay him from his ultimate goal of serving the community. Perhaps, not many are aware that Palanivel first made his name in the public sphere as a consumer advocate. He was the executive director of the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) back in the early 1970s. 'I was a vocal critic of bad consumer policies and practices and a firebrand who didn't think twice to rally on the support of the people in order to address a grievance,' he says.

The fact that Palanivel is a teetotaler and a vegetarian who makes annual religious pilgrimages also creates a favourable perception among many. The simple lifestyle is a boost to his image. Added to that is his position as the Women, Family and Community Development Deputy Minister, which gives him strategic leverage within a community which is economically weak. He has initiated many projects within the ministry which has touched those at the grass roots level, including ensuring Malaysian Indians are better served through the *Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysi*a programme. The years served in NGOs have evidently helped him to concretise empathy into action plans. 'My work in CAP has allowed me to identify closely with the aggrieved,' he says.

But Subramaniam is no lightweight. Clearly a seasoned politician, he definitely has some hardcore support in many key areas, notably in the Klang Valley and Johor. Also, he retains key positions in various diverse organisations. For example, he is the president of Nesa Pelbagai Bhd, a cooperative that was founded by Manickavasagam in 1974. According to its 2004 annual report, the cooperative, despite a 10-year freeze on activity from 1988 to 1997, currently has a share capital base of RM11.58 million and a shareholders' fund of RM30.47 million. Subramaniam, says the cooperative, declared a 6% dividend to its shareholders last year. He also heads the Malaysian Indian Football Association.

As for political pedigree, the match-up is very interesting. Palanivel has yet to lose

'I INTEND TO STAY PUT!'

MIC Deputy President Datuk S Subramaniam says he is not a hindrance to anyone.

DATUKS Subramaniam is one of the old guards of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), having served the party for more than 20 years in various capacities. His supporters say that having been the loyal deputy for more than 20 years has put him in good stead, and party members feel he should be given a chance to helm the party one day. However, there are also some who believe that he has over-stayed his welcome. Not surprisingly, Subramaniam intends to put right this perception and give any challenger a good fight. He certainly does not intend to go away easily. Excerpts of a recent interview with him:

How would you describe your relationship with Datuk G Palanivel?

We have known each other for a long time. I first got to know him during our days in University Malaya. However, he was always the quiet type so I wouldn't really say I knew him well then. Over the years, we have become party colleagues. So, my relationship with him does go a long way.

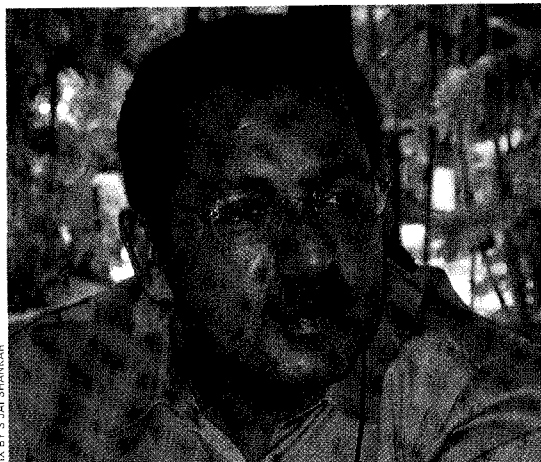


PHOTO BY S. JAI SHANKAR

How would the community benefit if you retained your position as the Number Two in MIC?

The community is already benefiting from my position now. I am one of those people who works smart. I don't think it is absolutely necessary to work very long hours if we know how to manage our time. Today, I am working as I have been working in the past. I discharge all my responsibilities as the deputy president

of MIC in an efficient and timely manner. So, the question whether a change is necessary if I retain my position does not arise. No one can prove that I have ever been a hindrance to anyone in the party and have in any way compromised the effectiveness of the party.

Do you have a specific manifesto for this election?

I don't have a specific manifesto because of many reasons. The main reason is that I have been around for so long that the MIC members know exactly where I stand in most of the pressing issues facing the community. My network within the party is good and as such, I prefer talking to them personally to ensure that they get my message and understand how I will respond to this challenge. But as I said earlier, I am not new in MIC. The members are fully aware of what I am capable of.

What are your achievements as a leader of the Indian community?

Although this may sound like a simple question, it is, actually, very difficult for me to answer. This is because as deputy president, most of my work within the party is credited to the whole leadership and not to me alone. For example, I did my part and raised millions of ringgit for MIC projects such as the Maju Institute of Educational Development (MIED). However, it has always been my policy not to take credit for such activities. That is why I tell all my supporters who carry out fund-raising activities to contribute the money directly to the MIC leadership and not to me personally. I believe in teamwork and it makes sense for them to contribute directly. But, of course, when this happens, some critics would like to say that I have not done my part. But a mature member will know how I work. On an individual basis, I have set up my organisations to ensure that the Indian community remains relevant amidst the multitude of challenges that it is currently facing. One of the most significant is the running of Nesa Pelbagai Bhd, a cooperative that was founded by Tan Sri Manickavasagam in 1974. A look at the 2004 annual report will show that we have been successful despite being relatively inactive for about a decade. We declared a 6% dividend to our shareholders last year. I also

head various other social organisations, ensuring that I keep close to the grassroots. For example, I am the president of the Malaysian Indian Football Association. I am also a great believer in the eradication of poverty, including urban poverty. In fact, I was the earliest advocate for the fight against urban poverty in this country. For example, when I became the Deputy Federal Territory Minister, I made sure that even squatter areas received piped water and electricity.

What are your views on the Ninth Malaysia Plan?

The Ninth Malaysia Plan has its good points. It is for poverty eradication and achievement of various socio-economic indicators. In that context, all Malaysians irrespective of race will stand to benefit from these policies. As such, I am happy that the government has decided to pursue such projects. On the other hand, although some measures have been outlined such as providing greater educational and training opportunities to Indians, the government has not taken other steps that in my opinion could have helped the Indian community. For example, I think it will be very helpful for the government to use a Permodalan Nasional Bhd (PNB)-type institutional fund to help increase the community's equity stake in the economy. In fact, PNB in itself can help to undertake the task as it has proven to be very capable of doing so for many other similar objectives. I am also concerned with the fact that the target period for the Indian community to achieve a 3% equity stake in the economy has been extended from 2010 to 2020. Indians will become a drag to the economy if their socio-economic conditions are not looked into and I am sure that is not what the government wants.

any election, whether at the party or national level. In contrast, Subramaniam has suffered some notable losses in the past. The monumental loss to Samy Vellu for the MIC presidency was definitely the turning-point in his career. The defeat must rankle because Subramaniam was widely accepted as the blue-eyed boy of Manickavasagam. The electoral loss at the age of 34 to V David of the Democratic Action Party for the Damansara constituency in 1978 also shaded his career path further. But that also means that he

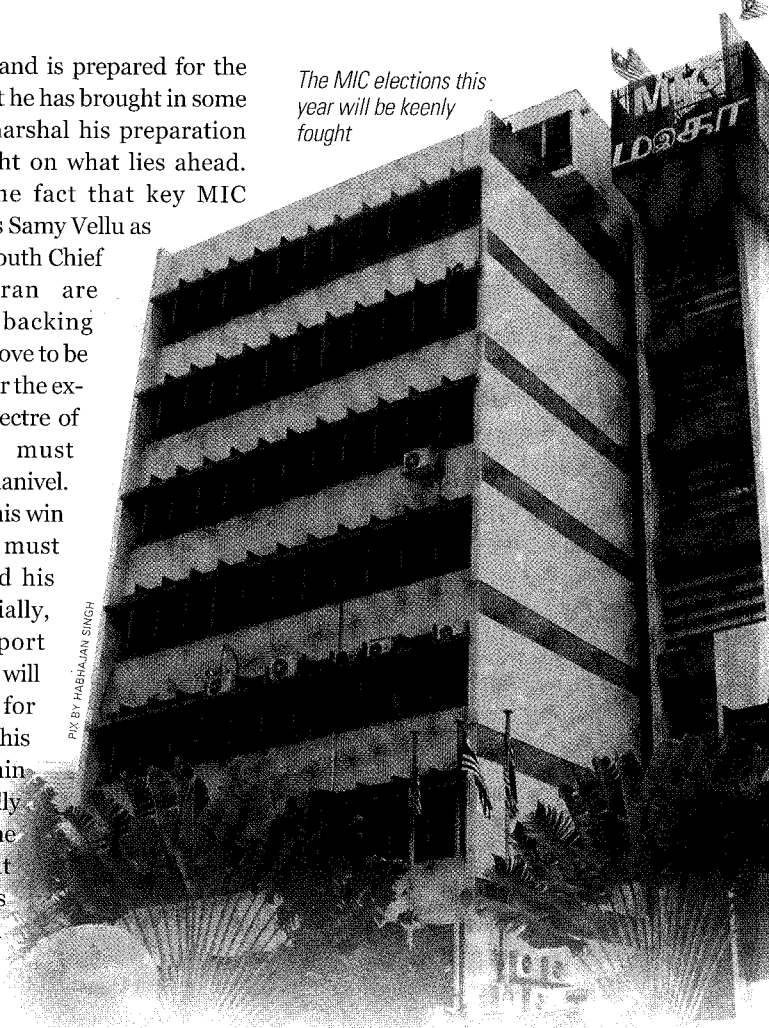
knows the math and is prepared for the fight. The fact that he has brought in some key helpers to marshal his preparation indicates foresight on what lies ahead. Furthermore, the fact that key MIC politicians such as Samy Vellu as well as the MIC Youth Chief S A Vigneswaran are aggressively backing Palanivel could prove to be a poison chalice for the ex-journalist. The spectre of sympathy votes must certainly worry Palanivel. The thought that his win is an unfair one must have also crossed his mind. More crucially, the strong support from the president will make it difficult for Palanivel to gauge his real strength within the party, especially considering that the perception is that the delegates' votes are not a secret and as such, it is likely that not many would dare to

cross the line laid by the president. This means that if Palanivel successfully takes on Subramaniam, it might still leave a question mark among many whether he is really the legitimate Number Two in the party.

So, what do both politicians have to offer? Palanivel says the objective is to ensure that the bottom 30% of the Indian community especially would get the help and support that they deserve to break out permanently from the vicious poverty cycle that they are trapped in. Subramaniam says he intends to keep the status quo and legitimise the support he gets from the delegates by ensuring all his responsibilities are discharged accordingly. Clearly, both candidates are not promising major changes for the party with an estimated 640,000 members. So, it might just boil down to real politik where delegates' allegiance is swayed by personal indebtedness, self-interest and political manoeuvring.

The contest will also be viewed with

The MIC elections this year will be keenly fought



PIX BY HABIBIAN SINGH

interest by other potential top leaders such as current secretary-general Datuk S Sothinathan and even Vigneswaran as it will give them an indication of the members' sentiments. Sothinathan, who is touted as a potential long-term rival for Palanivel, is, in fact, going for the vice-president's post.

Should Palanivel win, Samy Vellu would have accomplished what very few MIC presidents of the past (even the strong ones such as Tun Sambanthan) have not been able to do – remove the deputy and install a new vice-president.

However, whether this is a proxy war or not should be secondary. What's more intriguing is whether Subramaniam can upstage Samy Vellu's blue-eyed boy. If he does, then the irony would be grating, considering what happened in the 1970s. But if he doesn't, then the political career of this veteran will be in serious jeopardy. As such, the real question now is: Will fortune favour the man with the historical eye? **mb**