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MCA's New President: From Disgrace to Community Hero?

By Choong Pui Yee

Synopsis

New MCA president Chua Soi Lek has recently ruffled the feathers of UMNO and the Malay-rights group Perkasa. Are we witnessing the formerly disgraced politician positioning himself as a Chinese community hero? If so, what are the implications for Malaysia's coalition politics?

Commentary

THE NEWLY-ELECTED Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) President Chua Soi Lek has been in the limelight recently for his outspoken comments and proposals. These have ruffled the feathers of MCA's main political ally in the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) alliance, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and Perkasa, a spirited Malay-rights group. In less than a month, he has courted controversy by alleging that the most corrupt countries are Muslim-majority countries and by calling for the gradual abolition of pro-Malay affirmative policies at the MCA's Chinese Economic Congress earlier in August. To top it all, Chua has even implied that some UMNO leaders are still trapped in mindsets of the past.

Upsetting the Malay ground

Needless to say, UMNO leaders have been swift to respond. Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin raised the spectre of the 1969 racial riots in a veiled warning to Chua not to stir racial unrest. UMNO Vice President Hishamuddin Hussein urged MCA not to undermine the unity of the BN in his words and in actions. Ibrahim Ali who heads Perkasa has called Chua not to be a 'Chinese Warrior' of the mould of veteran opposition leader Lim Kit Siang of the Democratic Action Party (DAP). Ibrahim Ali further mocked Chua's attempt at rallying the Chinese community as futile given the erosion to his credibility caused by his involvement in an earlier sex scandal. Instead of retreating however, Chua stood his ground.

Why is Chua willing to antagonise his counterparts from UMNO? Are his actions part of a concerted attempt to rectify the perception that the current MCA is unable to stand up to UMNO, so as to regain the support that MCA had lost at the March 2008 elections?

Who is Chua?

Chua, a medical doctor, served as a state assemblyman in Penggaram, Johor since 1986. In 2004, he became member of parliament for Labis, also in Johor, and was appointed to the Malaysian cabinet as health minister.

He developed a reputation for being a straight-talking politician. In January 2008, Chua resigned from all his political and public offices as a result of a sex scandal. At the time, it seemed the scandal not only cost him his political career, but also tarnished his image as it became a subject of satire among the public and was used by Chua's political opponents to question his credibility.

Chua's return to the political scene however, was equally dramatic. In the second half of 2008, he won the Batu Pahat division chairmanship and then the deputy president post in MCA -- only to find himself expelled from the party the following year when his opponents once again used the sex scandal issue against him. But internal conflict within the MCA escalated, allowing Chua to be re-instated in the party and to contest fresh party elections in March 2010. Chua ran for the presidency against incumbent president Ong Tee Keat and emerged the victor to become the new president of MCA. Though he triumphed, Chua inherited an MCA marred by factionalism and internal rifts, and that has lost substantial popular support among the Chinese community. The question now is whether Chua's recent moves can be read as indicative of a revival of the MCA.

Sandiwara?

In a Merdeka Centre survey carried out in Malaysia between 27 June and 25 July 2010, it was found that only nine per cent of the respondents regarded Chua as a capable leader. The survey also found that the common Chinese voters still have reservations towards Chua due to the sex scandal. Less than 30 percent felt that MCA represented the interests of the Chinese community. Taken at face value, these findings illustrate the fact that the perception of MCA as a party subservient to UMNO and unable to protect the interests of the Chinese community within the ruling coalition still holds.

Chua may be genuinely trying to articulate deeply felt sentiments of the Chinese community. Indeed, it would be difficult for him and MCA as a whole to avoid doing this if they want to remain relevant to the community that the party represents. The failure of BN (and MCA) to win back Chinese votes in the two by-elections in Selangor and Sarawak in April and May this year despite strenuous efforts to woo the Chinese underlined the need for Chua to come out more strongly in defence of Chinese interests. Nonetheless one cannot ignore the cynicism which has permeated the Malaysian political arena, so much so that some analysts have viewed Chua's outspokenness as sandiwara -- that is, mere play-acting between MCA and UMNO that would in real terms yield nothing for the MCA or the Chinese community.

Ultimately, Chua's brinkmanship is a calculated risk, reckoning that MCA's current posture of subordination to UMNO is untenable if the party is to remain relevant to Malaysia's Chinese community. On the other hand however, the reality confronting him (and MCA) is that, firstly, UMNO continues to anchor the BN, and secondly, there are quarters within MCA who do not share his assertive and maverick approach to coalition politics.

What this means is that notwithstanding Chua's exertions, significant obstacles remain that will continue to impede his attempt to reposition MCA as a leading voice for the aspirations of Malaysia's Chinese community.

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